

FRANK NORMAN

The Monkey Pulled His Hair

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Chapter One

The sun poured through a chink in the curtains and lit up the room. The walls were alive with succulent perversity. A girl wearing a black satin corset trimmed with pink lace looks down coyly from a coloured photograph, her lips painted scarlet and her eyes shaded with mink eyelashes. On her feet she has black patent-leather shoes with eight-and-a-half-inch-high stiletto heels, her long raven hair cascades over her shoulders and down her back. She is ravishing and very young. A caption reads 'SIN CRAZY'.

Over the mantelpiece is a black and white photograph of Virginia Rappe, wearing white silk panties, and drinking from a bottle of champagne on which there has been glued a portrait of Fatty Arbuckle; she has a sad expression on her face.

The whole of one wall is taken up with a huge enlargement. It depicts a decadent party in full swing. Graphic description:

'There are sixteen young girls from various parts of the globe in various stages of undress. Some are wearing silken underwear with trimmings of lace, others, wearing leather gauntlets and high-heeled boots, are lounging on a bearskin rug. Five young cavalry officers wearing dress uniforms, spurs and crisp moustaches are guzzling champagne which is being served by negro slaves wearing spiked breastplates; a thin chain attaches the fetters around their ankles to the bracelets around their wrists giving them freedom of movement but not of escape.

'One massive buck is feeding champagne to a teenage girl tied to a rocking chair, a Hussar officer of the same age as the girl looks on with an amused expression on his face, the expression on the girl's face is one of anguish.

'In one corner lies a pile of discarded female attire, a

young subaltern is holding up a pair of silken panties with the tips of his fingers, his audience laughs uproariously. Sitting in their midst is a pantieless old nymphomaniac of twenty-two. She is painting her toe-nails, her eyes are vacant and she is feeling sore; an elderly Brigadier is observing her closely with lust in his First World War eyes.

'A giggly young girl lying on a satin couch is having her bare bottom powdered with an enormous Aubrey Beardsley powder-puff by a gigantic negro slave with a sinister look in his eye.'

On the highly-polished mahogany bedside table there stands a burnished copper idol. It is a reproduction of the Tibetan Idol of Love. It has several heads, many arms and legs and six copulatory organs, two of which are erect.

Over the bed hangs a print of 'Joseph and Potiphar's wife' by Johan König. It screams of the insatiability of woman. On the bed, smoking a Turkish cigarette and sipping China tea from a Dresden cup, lies Daniel Valler reading the *Kama Sutra*.

Daniel laid the book aside and sank back onto the pillow. Wouldn't it really be a marvel if girls were like that, he thought. According to the teachings of (Rishi) Vatsyayana women should be beautiful, clean, loving, understanding, ardent, sweet-natured, domesticated and above all passionate. In bed they should know the arts of kissing, biting, scratching, embracing, not to mention the techniques of intercourse. There were in fact sixty-four arts that every girl should know if she wished to be a perfect wife, but as far as Daniel knew he had never met a girl in his life who knew one of them. All they want is my balls for earrings, he thought, and then the phone rang.

'Who is it?' said Daniel into the mouthpiece.

'Darling,' replied a voice at the other end, 'it's me.'

'Which me is that?' said Daniel in a bored tone of voice.

'Come along, darling, don't be like that. You know very well who it is.'

'Oh, it's you.'

'Yes, darling, it's me.'

'Listen, darling; don't darling me, darling!'

She was beautiful, rich and married. Daniel had taken her to the theatre the night before and then to dinner. He had known her for three months during which time she had given him a pair of diamond cufflinks, a gold watch and a solid-gold cigarette case. She had also taken him to her husband's villa in Capri where they had spent a luscious week swimming, dancing, making passionate love and talking to each other in baby language.

The night before Daniel had experienced one of the narrowest escapes of his life. When they had finished their dinner she had taken him back to her place. (Daniel much preferred to spend the night there because her bedroom smelt erotic and also when she stayed with him she was inclined to hang about in the morning and make him take her to lunch.) The taxi had pulled up in front of her house and, as Daniel had run out of money, she had paid the driver off. Daniel had been to the house many times before and therefore knew his way around well enough. He went into the drawing-room and poured himself a drink, whilst she went upstairs.

'Pour me a drink, darling,' she called. 'I'll be down in a minute.'

Daniel poured two drinks, picked one of them up and walked over to the sofa and settled himself comfortably amongst the cushions.

She came into the room wearing a silver satin nightie and fluffy white mules, her Titian hair falling over her shoulders and breasts. Without a word she came over to where he was sitting and slid onto his knee, her tongue slipped between his lips and his hand stroked her silken thighs.

'Darling,' she gasped, 'I love you more than anything in the world.'

Daniel smiled to himself and nibbled her left nipple, which drove her frantic with desire.

'Darling,' she moaned, 'let's go to bed. . . .'

An hour and a half later they were lying naked in each other's arms when suddenly they heard a key go into the lock on the front door.

'It's my husband!' she exclaimed. 'He said that he wouldn't be back until the weekend. He's never here during the week. If he catches you here God knows what will happen. . . .'

Daniel laughed and jumped out of bed. She was madly rushing round the room collecting his clothes.

'Darling,' she hissed, 'you'll have to leave by the balcony. There's a fire escape into the garden.'

A voice downstairs called out, 'Nancie, are you in bed?'

'Quick,' she whispered, and then to her husband, 'Darling, what are you doing here? Pour a drink. I'll be down in a minute.'

Daniel almost choking with laughter bounded out of the french windows onto the balcony without a stitch on. She hurled his clothes after him and blew him a kiss, then closed the windows and drew the curtains. There was a full moon so Daniel was well able to see where he was and what he was doing. In her haste she had thrown him a pair of trousers which were not his own. In fact they were a pair of hers. He managed to get them on but ripped them in the process. He put on his shirt but could not tuck it in, and then his jacket. Try as he did he could not stop laughing.

At last he was more or less dressed and was about to climb down the fire escape when suddenly he heard voices in the bedroom behind him.

'I had to come back today for the board meeting tomorrow,' said her husband's voice.

'Well, you might have told me,' she replied hotly.

'I did tell you,' he said meekly.

'I bet she leads him a dog's life,' thought Daniel.

'Well, I don't remember you telling me,' she insisted.

There was a small gap in the curtains and Daniel peered into the room. The husband was a fat man with a bald head and old enough to be her father. He was in the process of taking his clothes off, while she was seated on the side of the bed with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The old man folded each article as he took it off and placed it on a chair beside the bed; eventually he was naked. He took a pair of pyjamas from a drawer and put them on. She got up from the bed, stubbed the cigarette out in an ashtray viciously, then walked over to him and pulled him down savagely onto the bed, her hot lips burning against his. Then the light went out.

Daniel smiled to himself then carefully descended the fire escape to the garden. At the garden gate he suddenly realised that he did not have any money for a cab. He could always get one and pay at the other end, he thought, but was not at all sure that he had any money at home either. As he came out of the garden gate into the drive he saw a Bentley Continental parked at the front door. Stealthily he crept up to it and glanced through the window. The key was in the ignition; he tried the door, it was not locked; in a flash he was in the driver's seat and speeding off down the street.

'Your old man's car is in the car park just round the corner,' said Daniel.

'He's reported it to the police. Shall we have lunch?'

'What do you mean, he's reported it to the police?'

'He thought it had been stolen by a thief in the night.'

'Well, it was, wasn't it?' replied Daniel lighting a cigarette. 'Anyway you can tell him where it is now, can't you?'

'I can't do that.'

'Why not?'

'Don't be silly, darling, if I tell him I know where it is he'll want to know how I know!'

'Tell him a little lover told you.'

'Don't be like that, darling. You haven't answered my question yet.'

'What question?'

'Can we have lunch today?'

'All right, if you like. And bring my trousers with you.'

'And you bring mine,' she giggled. 'I'll meet you at the usual place. Do you still love me?'

'You're a whore. One o'clock O.K.?'

'Thank you, darling, and one o'clock will be fine.'

'Stick with me, baby, and you'll fart through silk.'

'Bye.'

'Bye.'

Daniel threw the receiver down and leapt out of bed.

And that is how it had always been ever since Daniel had reached the age of puberty. If it was not one girl it was another and most of the time it was three or four on the go at the same time. The odd thing was that he did not think of himself as pernicious when it came to girls, indeed he loved them all dearly. Whenever he met a new girl he fell in love with her completely and absolutely; there was no pretence about it; he loved her to distraction.

Daniel had never wanted for anything in his whole life. His father was rich and had always let him have anything he wanted whenever he wanted it. This was really more from guilt than generosity. He had been divorced by Daniel's mother for perpetual adultery when Daniel was only five. He then married a tart from Duke Street, St James's, who hated Daniel, a feeling that was mutual between them. Her name was Hatty but Daniel always referred to her as 'that woman'. Nothing would induce him to call her mother.

Hatty had tried often to win Daniel's affection without any success whatever. There was one particular time on his tenth birthday that no one in the family was ever likely to forget.

He often wished that he had been born homosexual; he greatly admired the old 'Queens' that he saw in West End clubs. The idea of going to bed with any of them repelled him but he liked their company and the way they operated. They would pick up their prey, pour masses of alcohol down its throat and then whisk it away in a taxi to bed. Trade done they gave it an agreed amount, usually two pounds though sometimes more and often less, and that was that. There were rarely any repercussions. Now and then a sailor or a guardsman would get drunk and lash out with his fists but this was only an occupational hazard which frightened no one but the sailor or guardsman. There were no phone calls or questions such as 'Do you love me, darling?' or 'Where are you going to take me tonight?' or 'What are you going to buy me for my birthday?' There were no eggs on toast for breakfast. No diamond rings and bracelets to buy. No monthly menstruations or contraceptives to worry about. No babies, abortions, sagging breasts and stretch marks. Daniel was so healthy, normal and randy that it made him sick.

He went into the bathroom and turned on the taps. When the bath was full and steaming he poured far too much bath oil into it, then scrubbed himself from head to foot. Having bathed and shaved he went back into the bedroom where he dressed in his newest and most elegant suit, a cream-coloured shirt and maroon knitted tie. He then brushed a pair of toffee-toned calfskin shoes and slipped them on his feet. In spite of his ordeal of the night before he felt as fresh as a daisy. At the corner of the street he bought a miniature red rose from the flower-seller and hailed a taxi.

Nancie sat at a corner table of the restaurant cosseted in furs and sipping a bloody Mary. The whites of her eyes looked like stained-glass windows behind the dark glasses she was wearing.

Daniel, his father and Hatty lived together in a large house in Regent's Park. They had servants and lived in the lap of

luxury. For some reason that no one knew, Hatty was very keen on wild animals and spent a good deal of her time visiting the zoo which was very near to the house. She had also converted the garden at the back of the house into a vivarium in which she kept some snakes, a few tropical birds and a monkey called Howard, a ferocious beast who lived in a cage in the centre of the garden. Daniel hated Howard and kept away from him as much as he could, though sometimes he would stand at a safe distance away from the cage and pull faces at him.

'Come here, darling,' Hatty had said, 'I have a birthday treat for you.'

'What is it?' Daniel had asked without much interest.

'It's a surprise, dear. Come into the garden.'

Daniel was reluctant but followed her out through the french windows. He had noticed that she had a basket of fruit under her arm but had thought nothing of it. To his horror she beckoned him over to Howard's cage.

'Come along, darling, as a special treat for your birthday you can feed Howard.'

Daniel could hardly believe his ears, it was true that he had never actually told anyone how much he hated Howard, but surely he had made it obvious enough. Cautiously he edged his way towards the cage while the monkey watched him closely with smouldering eyes.

'Come along, darling. Don't be frightened. He won't bite you!' exclaimed Hatty.

This was something that Daniel was not at all sure was the truth. His father had given him a toy train for his birthday. Clutching it tightly in his hand he approached the cage, every nerve in his body was on edge; he was ready to defend himself if need be against the hirsute. Suddenly Hatty opened the iron door of the cage and without warning Howard bounded out and dived into her arms.

'Wazza-ickle-babieeee-pookles-wookles-den?' she asked Howard, kissing him full on the lips.

Daniel had retreated to what he thought a safe enough distance and hidden behind a tree. Hatty forced a peeled banana down Howard's throat and tried to coax Daniel from his hiding place. This she found was an impossibility, for nothing would induce him to show himself.

'Daniel, you are an ungrateful boy,' she said at last in desperation.

Daniel said nothing though he did peep around the tree. That was a great mistake, for Howard spotted him in a flash and wriggled from Hatty's embrace and darted in the direction of Daniel's hiding place. Daniel saw Howard coming and rushed to the other end of the garden with the monkey in hot pursuit.

'Stop running, darling,' screamed Hatty. 'He won't hurt you if you stand still.'

Daniel did not hear her because Howard had caught up with him and had leapt onto his shoulders, and was in the process of trying to pull his hair out by the roots. In an attempt to defend himself Daniel waved the toy train around his head. More by luck than good judgment the toy came into contact with Howard's head and he let out a screech of pain and fell to the ground. Hatty rushed to the scene of the crime threatening Daniel with dire punishment for damaging 'sweet' Howard's head. She picked the monkey up in her arms and tenderly stroked its bleeding head. It looked up at her with an amazed expression on its face and sorrow in its eyes.

'You beastly little boy!' shouted Hatty kissing Howard on the lips again. 'Just you wait till your father comes home.'

Daniel said nothing, just smiled and walked away.

Hatty rushed into the house and rang the family doctor at his Harley Street consulting room and demanded that he send an ambulance straightaway to take Howard to the London Clinic. For Howard was her child and Daniel simply a pet.

Daniel waved to Nancie, went over to the table and sat down. He loved her in the same way that a condemned man might

love the hangman's daughter. Both are hopeless and short-lived.

'Hello, darling,' smiled Nancie, 'you look beautiful today.'

'Well I don't feel very beautiful,' replied Daniel, beckoning the head waiter who came over to the table with a menu which he handed to Nancie.

'What would you like, madame?' asked the waiter, pencil poised.

'I'd like a large Scotch,' volunteered Daniel.

'Certainly, sir,' said the waiter and then to Nancie, 'The chicken vol-au-vent is very good today.'

'That sounds nice, and could I have turtle soup to start, please?' said Nancie.

'Thank you, madame,' said the waiter. 'And for you, sir?'

Daniel glanced at the menu.

'I'll have the fresh salmon and salad.'

'Certainly, sir.'

The waiter bowed and discreetly backed away from the table.

'You won't forget my Scotch, will you!' called Daniel.

The waiter turned and gave him a knowing smile. Nancie stroked the back of Daniel's neck.

'Darling,' she simpered, 'you need a haircut.'

'Don't mess about with my hair, you know I don't like it,' snapped Daniel moving away from her. 'Is your old man still about?'

'He went to a board meeting this morning.'

'I know,' smiled Daniel.

'How do you know?'

'Telepathy,' said Daniel.

The waiter came over to their table with Daniel's whisky and laid it down beside his side plate. Daniel smiled at the waiter, picked up the glass and took a great swig of the translucent amber liquid. He closed his eyes and pulled a disgusted face as the spirit went down his throat and into his belly.

'You know what, darling, I don't think that the human

body was made for pouring whisky into from morning till night,' he said taking a second swig.

The waiter brought Nancie's bowl of turtle soup and delicately placed it in front of her.

'Would you care for a little sherry?' he asked.

'Mmmm, that would be nice,' she replied.

'What do you want to do this afternoon?' asked Daniel.

'I don't know, darling. I've got an invitation for the opening of the Poliakoff retrospective exhibition at the Tate. We could go to that if you like.'

'I don't fancy it,' replied Daniel, 'I would rather have a few drinks.'

'We could always go back to your place,' she smiled.

'For God's sake don't start getting lecherous at this time of the morning, it's disgusting.'

'Is my baby not feeling well then?'

'For Christ's sake!' exclaimed Daniel in desperation. 'All you ever think about is your muffin.'

'Well that's a nice way to talk at the meal table I must say.'

The waiter came over to the table and dished out the main course and asked them if they wanted any wine, which they did not. Daniel ordered another large whisky instead.

'Don't you love me any more?' Nancie pouted.

'Now don't start that again. Of course I love you. I fuck you, don't I?'

This remark made them both laugh and the rest of the lunch was enlivened by sexual riposte.

Daniel ordered coffee and brandy and after several glasses Nancie paid the bill and they left.

'Did you bring my trousers?' asked Daniel as they went through the swing doors.

'You'll have to come and collect them yourself,' she giggled.

'You see I have some power over you now.'

As they walked along the street Nancie tried to talk Daniel into coming with her to the Tate to look at the Poliakoff paintings.

'Darling, there will be hundreds of simply devastatingly interesting people there,' she said.

'Look,' replied Daniel. 'If you want to go so much, why don't you go on your own?' That's the trouble with women, he thought, they are for everlastingly wanting you to do things that you would never dream of doing in a million years.

Suddenly he felt hemmed in on all sides, an iron band was being tightened around his skull; he had to get away from her; an excuse, an excuse; my kingdom for an excuse.

'My God!' he exclaimed, looking at his gold watch. 'Is that the time? I had an appointment for a fitting at my tailor's half an hour ago. Listen, you go to the Tate and I'll meet you later, all right?'

Nancie pouted. 'Why don't I come with you to your tailor's, darling?' she suggested. 'Then we could go to the Tate afterwards.'

Daniel could see an argument looming on the horizon. All he had to do now was to say the wrong thing. It would not have to be something radically wrong, slightly wrong would do the trick just as well. She would fly into a rage and eventually after giving him a volley of abuse she would storm off in a huff up the street, leaving him standing there. What he did say was *radically* wrong. 'Look, I have already told you that I don't want to go to the Tate and look at a load of stupid paintings with a lot of even stupider people talking tripe.'

That did it. 'You never want to go anywhere with me, do you?' she replied in a menacing tone. 'You've got another girl somewhere, haven't you?' Daniel did not deny or affirm. 'I knew it! Who is she? Come on, out with it. Who is she?'

Daniel still did not reply, and Nancie began to cry.

'Why do you treat me the way you do?'

Still Daniel remained silent.

'You know I love you, don't you? All I want is you. All I've ever wanted is you. Why can't you be nicer to me?'

'What do you mean, treat you the way I do?' asked Daniel in real astonishment.

'You know very well what I mean.'

'I do not.'

'Well, you won't come to the Tate with me, will you?'

'No.'

'Well, there you are then.'

'What do you mean, there you are then?'

'Don't keep on asking me the same questions back.'

'I don't understand you,' said Daniel. 'Really, I don't, anyone would think we were married the way you carry on.'

'So that's how you feel, is it?' screamed Nancie. Several passers-by glanced at her and then hurried away.

'Why don't you stop shouting?' Daniel said quietly.

'And why don't you go off and meet your fancy piece?' she yelled even louder than before. Before he could answer she ran down the street, hailed a taxi at the corner and disappeared inside it.

Daniel smiled to himself, lit a cigarette and continued along the street.

'Now,' he thought, 'I can go and play a few frames of snooker with Scoop O'Toole.'

Howard rapidly recovered from the injuries sustained by the blow on the head from Daniel's toy train and if anything became even more cantankerous than he had been before. And Daniel became more and more frightened of him.

Hatty still remained in love with Howard which was indeed a very unhealthy state of affairs. She had reported Daniel to his father for smashing the monkey over the head, but no retribution was forthcoming. This was not because Daniel's father would not have liked to tan his hide, it was just that Mr Valler was too lazy to do anything about it. When told of the incident he simply remarked,

'Yes, yes, dear, I will talk to him about it.'

'Talk to him,' Hatty had shouted losing her temper, 'talk

to him, indeed! That boy needs the thrashing of his life. If you don't give it to him, I will do it myself.'

This was a great lie because she would no more have laid a finger on Daniel than fly over the moon, for she knew that, if she did, Daniel would have killed her.

She remembered the time that he had put rat poison in her cocoa simply because she had ordered him to wash his hands before Sunday tea. Daniel was a little demon and she knew it. After drinking the cocoa she had become violently ill and the doctor had had to be called. He had without delay given her an enema and as she lay on her bed writhing in agony and shrieking loudly, 'Oh, oh, oh!' Daniel, who was watching the scene through the keyhole, had very nearly split his sides with laughing. As soon as Hatty had recovered sufficiently, she had caught the first aeroplane to Nassau, where she spent six months recuperating.

For some reason that Daniel never understood the incident was never mentioned to him, though he did notice that the chef, Monsieur Gaston, was dismissed from the kitchen. He never did understand why because Monsieur Gaston had been with the family for as long as Daniel could remember; he was also a very fine cook. Hatty, however, knew only too well that Monsieur Gaston was not the culprit; but, to have accused Daniel of the foul deed would have been more than she dared do, for Mr Valler would not have believed her and would very likely have threatened her with divorce. She also feared that Daniel having failed once would not do so the second time.

Chapter Two

Scoop O'Toole was an alcoholic and also something of a degenerate, a fact that pleased him enormously for the great thing about Scoop was that nothing whatever got him down. As his name implies Scoop was a journalist and as his surname suggests he worked for the *Irish Star*, as their London correspondent. Although he was fifty-one years old he was extremely handsome and very attractive to women, particularly young ones, who fell over themselves to get him into bed. It was his Irish charm that did it, coupled with the many promises he made them that he would get their photographs in the paper. What good it would do a girl to have her picture in the *Irish Star* remained a mystery to Daniel.

Daniel walked into the snooker hall and saw Scoop at the bar drinking a large Scotch.

'Hello,' said Daniel, going up behind him and tapping him on the shoulder, 'why aren't you out covering a nice murder somewhere?'

Scoop turned and smiled, flashing his false teeth at Daniel.

'Don't ask stupid questions,' he replied. 'And have a drink.'

Daniel ordered a brandy.

'Do you feel like a game?' asked Daniel. 'Number two table is free.'

'I will play you if you like,' said Scoop, 'after the next drink. I've got a thirst on me like an elephant.'

Daniel ordered another round of drinks and signalled the boy to rack up the balls on number two table. Their drinks in their hands they walked over to the table.

'Do I get three blacks start as usual?' asked Daniel.

'O.K., boy,' grinned Scoop, 'but the way I feel today it is you who should give me a start.'

They tossed up, and Scoop, the winner, took a cue from the rack, placed the white ball to the left of the yellow ball and almost without looking slammed the cue ball into the triangle of red balls at the other end of the table, dispersing them all over the table. The white ball hit the bottom cushion, bounced off the lip of the left-hand-side middle pocket and came up the table and kissed the brown.

'You're on that red at the top pocket,' said Scoop. 'Bet you miss it though.'

'We shall see,' smiled Daniel, taking careful aim. If he gave the cue ball plenty of bottom, he could pot the red and come back on the blue which was still on its spot in the centre of the table. Daniel let fly. The red ball disappeared into the top left-hand pocket and the cue ball bounced back and left him an easy shot on the blue in the centre pocket.

'You're learning, Dan,' said Scoop cheerfully.

Daniel was somewhat over-eager to pot the blue ball and missed the shot. The white ball rolled down the table leaving Scoop on a red at the bottom of the table. This he potted easily and then the black and another red in the centre pocket, then the black again, another red and the pink; another red and the black again, after which he paused to chalk his cue.

'What did you do last night?' he asked. Daniel then told him the whole of the balcony scene which made Scoop laugh so much that he missed a red over the top right-hand pocket that was a gift.

'You're a lucky article, you are,' said Scoop picking up his glass.

Daniel potted the ball that had been left over the pocket. The cue ball kissed the green off the cushion. 'I went round to Frances's place for dinner,' volunteered Scoop.

'Did you,' replied Daniel potting the green ball and snookering himself behind the pink.

Frances was a beautiful anthropologist who lived in a flat in Chelsea next to a graveyard. From her bedroom window one had a fine view of the tombstones. Everywhere you looked

in her place there were bones, which both Daniel and Scoop found rather macabre. Daniel was convinced that she had dug them up from the tombs in the graveyard, in spite of the fact that from the shape of many of them they could not possibly have come from a human body. Daniel tried to screw the cue ball around the pink without success.

'Six away!' exclaimed Scoop. 'You'll have to do better than that, my lad, if you want to beat Joe Davis.'

'I do not have the slightest intention of playing Joe Davis,' snapped Daniel.

'All right, all right. Don't lose your temper just because you're losing,' said Scoop potting three balls in quick succession, red, black, red.

'She's a good cook, as a matter of fact,' continued Scoop, taking careful aim at a difficult brown on the bottom cushion. 'We had brontosaurus soup and dinosaur steaks.' The white ball hit the brown hard on the right-hand side sending it beautifully into the left centre pocket. Daniel could not help congratulating Scoop on the shot.

'Experience, my dear chap,' remarked Scoop. 'Experience. Jesus, I could do with another drink.'

After twenty minutes' play there were only two reds and the colours left on the table. Daniel took a shot at one of the reds, missed hopelessly and went in off the blue. 'Five away,' said Scoop. 'What's the score?'

Daniel looked at the scoreboard.

'You're forty in front.'

'You need a miracle to win, boy. That'll teach you to challenge your elders and betters.'

'Shall we stop?' asked Daniel.

'Just a minute,' replied Scoop potting the final red, then the black followed by all the other colours without any apparent effort. Yellow, green, brown, blue, pink, black!

Daniel did not feel like playing a second frame because Scoop was obviously on form, not that Daniel had ever beaten him when he was off form. It was simply a question of how

many points he lost by. He did not mind losing by a narrow margin but he hated to be thrashed. The game over they put their cues back in the rack and wandered back to the bar where Scoop ordered two large drinks.

'Do you know, if she wasn't so blasted clever I would marry her without delay,' said Scoop taking an enormous gulp from his glass.

'Who?'

'What do you mean, who? Frances of course.'

'That's what you said about Hilda,' laughed Daniel, 'only you said that she was too stupid.'

'I'd rather have them stupid than clever any day of the week.'

'The trouble with you is you're never satisfied,' replied Daniel with a smile. 'Cheers!' He took a sip of his drink.

'That is not my trouble at all,' said Scoop. 'My trouble is that I am choosy.'

'That's a good one I must say. You'd lay anything you can get your hands on.'

'That may be, but what I mean is... Take a girl like Hilda. Do you know what she did?'

'What?'

'I'll tell you what she did. She sent a pair of her drawers to a teenage idol, that's what. Can you imagine a bird who would do a thing like that? She must be off her rocker.'

'I think that's rather sexy,' replied Daniel. 'As a matter of fact, I once heard of a teenage idol who was sent so many items of female underwear he opened his own lingerie shop. He had no outlay for stock and made a fortune in no time.'

'I bet he's also got wanker's doom,' laughed Scoop. 'Frances is just as bad as Hilda ever was, in a different way though.'

'How?'

'The trouble with her is she's read too many books. Once a bird has read a book she gives up silk for sackcloth and face cream for carbolic. And also, all of a sudden she starts know-

ing every bloody thing. Do you know she only likes to have sex with all her clothes on. She reckons that's the only way she can get a thrill out of it. I don't think I'll see her any more.' Scoop finished his drink and beckoned to the barman.

'But you only met her last week,' ventured Daniel.

'So what difference does that make? That doesn't mean that she owns me, does it?'

'I suppose not.'

'Give us the same again, mate,' said Scoop to the barman.

In spite of the difference in their ages there was an indefinable magic between them, which was chemical and electric. They never spoke of it, it was just there. Each knew what the other was thinking and what they were going to say before they said it. They had met the year before in a pub. Scoop had been paralytic and asked Daniel to have a drink. Daniel, who had been in the company of two girls whose names they had long since forgotten, had accepted the offer of a drink and returned the kindness. The following morning had found them still in each other's company at Daniel's place, and from that moment on they had been virtually inseparable. Neither really understood why except that they had something for each other.

Several drinks later they left the snooker hall because Scoop had said that he had to go to a cocktail party at the Chinese Embassy which he might write a piece about depending on whether or not he managed to pick up any secrets about their space programme. He asked Daniel to accompany him but he declined the invitation because although he had been pleased to have a break from Nancie's company he now, full of drink, wanted to see her.

'All right,' said Scoop, 'I'll see you later at the Vulture Room if you're doing nothing.'

'Fine,' said Daniel and they parted company.

Daniel rang Nancie who invited him around as soon as 'maybe'. She swore that there would not be a recurrence of

last night's performance, and thus assured Daniel hailed a taxi.

It was six thirty by the time the cab arrived at the house, and being summer it was still light. How Daniel hated the summer. He was a creature of the night, he had a passion for neon lights, dark back streets, nightwatchmen and night clubs. His favourite colour was dark and his friends were night people, the man who drove the street-cleaning lorry, the copper on his lonely beat, the whores who lurked in dark corners and the Covent Garden porters when the pubs opened at five o'clock in the morning.

Just before he met Nancie he had been having a short affair with an Australian girl who had come to London because she had heard that the streets were paved with gold, only to find upon her arrival that they were covered with dog's shit. She had thought that she would rather like to be an actress, or a night club entertainer, or a window dresser, or a receptionist, or a shop assistant in a Mayfair store. She had thought that it would be rather nice to have a little flat in either Knightsbridge, Chelsea or Hampstead, but not one of her dreams had come true.

When Daniel picked her up in a dingy little all-night café in the Edgware Road, she was living in a dirty little attic room in Paddington and washing dishes for a living. She was also in dire need of an abortion. The culprit had been a disreputable character called Fred whom she had met one night at a bus stop. She told Daniel that the bouncer had offered to see her home. She had agreed, whereupon he had spent several nights in her bed, after which he had disappeared into thin air never to be seen again.

Upon finding herself in the 'family way' she had made an earnest attempt to take her life by cutting both her wrists with a razor blade. However, the attempt had failed because her landlord, with whom she was also going to bed in lieu of rent, had arrived in the nick of time to save her. She was carted off in an ambulance to Paddington hospital, where she had her

wrists stitched and a long talk with the almoner, who had told her that she was a silly girl and that taking her life would not solve any problems. Daniel considered this rather stupid advice because surely taking one's life solved all one's problems.

After hearing her story Daniel had felt sorry for her and had asked her to come home with him. She readily agreed because the way she looked at it was that she was in so much trouble as it was nothing could happen to her which could possibly make matters worse. In the taxi going back to his place Daniel held her hand; he noticed that her skin was rough but thought little of it.

'It is simply because of all this washing-up she has been doing,' he thought.

But when he got her home and her clothes off, he was horrified to find that she had skin like an armadillo from head to toe. It was like making love to a crocodile in more ways than one, for she cried her eyes out as she devoured him. After that first night he could not bear to touch her or even to be near her. Within a week he had deposited her more or less where he had found her, though she was fifty pounds better off than she had been before from Daniel's golden handshake, which he had given her more to ease his conscience than to help her on her way.

The cab jerked to a stop outside Nancie's house.

'That'll be seven and a tanner, mate,' said the cab driver. Daniel handed him a five-pound note that he had borrowed from Scoop O'Toole. 'Cor blimey, gov'ner, ain'tcha got any-fing smaller?' exclaimed the cabbie with inborn native cockney wit that gave Daniel a pain in the arse. 'Sorry,' said Daniel.

The cab driver, moaning all the time, counted out the change and handed it to Daniel, who gave him half a crown tip. Nancie had heard it arriving and opened the front door before Daniel had reached it. He walked straight in and in no time at all they were in bed. Due to the drink Daniel was

feeling rather savage. He went at her like a bull at a barn door.

'Take it easy, darling,' she whispered softly, 'or madam will be angry.'

This remark had the same effect as having a bucket of ice-cold water poured over his buttocks. He rolled off her and fell into a deep sleep.

He was in a beautiful garden, surrounded by every imaginable flower. There were chrysanthemums, nasturtiums, snapdragons, roses, carnations, carnivorous orchids that snapped at his ankles as he passed by, exotic rubber plants as tall as oak trees, sweet-williams and pinks. In the distance he could see a group of young maidens sitting in a semi-circle on a vast expanse of greensward; they were making daisy chains. He walked in their direction but got no nearer; his feet felt as though they were made of lead and he had a pain in his neck like a sweet toothache. He turned and saw Howard sitting on his shoulder. The monkey was very old and grey; his lips curled back over his yellow teeth in a hideous grin. Daniel opened his mouth to scream but no sound came out. Howard tore at his hair until great tufts of it came away in his hands.

The young maidens looked in Daniel's direction and began to giggle amongst themselves. Suddenly the ground beneath his feet opened, and there appeared a yawning chasm, at the bottom of which he could see the young maidens in an abattoir. They were now naked and holding long steel knives, which they plunged into the chests of old men as they came through a hatch tied to a conveyor belt. Many of the old men were dead already. Those who were not had sweet smiles on their wizened faces as though they welcomed the delicious steel into their hearts. Howard was now standing beside Daniel who looked down at him; the monkey looked up sweetly, though there was hate in his huge eyes. Daniel let out a silent scream and hurled himself into the sweet-smelling void. . . .

He awoke suddenly with a violent jerk. He was bathed in

sweat and for a moment did not realise where he was until he saw Nancie leaning over him.

'Did my baby have a hateful dream then?' she simpered, stroking his fevered brow.

Daniel made no reply but simply stared at her with the expression of a hurt child on his face.

'My God,' he gasped at last, 'where is it all going to end?'

'Don't be silly, darling, you just had a nightmare, that's all. Why don't I go and get us a nice little drinky-boo, and then we'll feel better, won't we?'

'If I went on my knees and begged his forgiveness, do you think he would give me another chance?'

'Don't talk like that, darling,' she replied, 'you've made me go all goose pimply.'

'What's the use? That's what I want to know,' shouted Daniel. 'Where the hell is it going to end? Go on, answer me that.'

'You're making me quite frightened, darling,' she said patting him on the behind. 'Come along, get up and have a bath and take me out somewhere nice.'

With that she got up and flounced out of the room. Daniel glared out of the window. After a while he looked at his watch.

'It's only eight thirty and already I've got a screaming hangover,' he said aloud. With that he swung himself out of bed and staggered to the bathroom where he soaked himself in Nancie's alabaster bath for twenty minutes.

'Is my baby feeling better now?' asked Nancie as Daniel came down the stairs.

'I'm all right,' he replied in a bored tone of voice. 'Can I have a drink?'

'Of course you can, my darling,' she gushed, walking over to the cocktail cabinet.

'Do you mind if I ask you a question?' asked Daniel slumping into an armchair.

'What is it?' she cooed.

‘Do you ever think about anything?’

‘What do you mean, my angel?’ she asked, crossing the room with Daniel’s drink in her hand.

‘What I say,’ said Daniel taking the drink. ‘Cheers,’ he took a swig. ‘Do you ever think about life, I mean what it is all for and that kind of thing?’

‘I say, we are in a funny mood tonight, aren’t we, darling?’ she replied after a great deal of thought.

‘Do you want to know something? You’re marvellous, absolutely marvellous, all you ever think about is jewels, furs and the south of France.’ Thinking that this was a compliment Nancie descended onto his knee and kissed him on the end of his nose.

‘That’s right, darling,’ she drooled. ‘No one can say I haven’t got good taste.’ She gave Daniel a tender kiss on the lips. ‘Come along, darling. Let’s go out before I eat you,’ she said.

‘Yes, let’s do that. Let’s go out and paint the town red, white and blue. No one can accuse us of not being patriotic.’ He finished his drink in one draught, got to his feet and marched out of the front door whistling the national anthem.

‘Wait for me!’ she yelled, grabbing her mink coat from the sofa and rushing after him.

At the Vulture Room Scoop O’Toole was making a start on his second bottle of whisky of the day. Most days he drank two bottles and some days he drank three. This had always amazed Daniel because if he drank too much he simply vomited and that was that. How on earth did he manage to keep it all down, Daniel wondered. He once asked Scoop about this.

‘Sure now, would that be a dreadful waste!’ he replied with a grin. ‘As a matter of fact I save me chundering till the mornings and then it’s only bile.’

The remark had sickened Daniel so he dropped the subject.

Nancie and Daniel entered the room, saw Scoop at the bar and went over to him.

'Hello, me little darlings,' Scoop greeted them in a slightly slurred tone of voice. 'Nancie, sure you look as pretty as Bridie O'Connor from County Cork.'

Scoop only got Irish when he was drinking, and then only with girls. For he found folksy Irishmen and the 'troubles' a very great bore indeed when he was sober; but when he was drunk a small flame flickered in his breast. On Saint Patrick's Day he would not touch a drop for he hated to drink with the bogmen.

Nancie gave Scoop a peck on the cheek, and perched herself on the bar stool next to him, and shouted at the barman.

'Can I have a nice iced bottle of Krug 1959, please, darling?'

'Certainly, madam,' replied the barman, colouring slightly.

'How did you get on at the Chinese Embassy?' asked Daniel turning to Scoop.

'Full of Chinamen,' replied Scoop flatly. 'Did you know that if the entire population of China were to pass by Buckingham Palace in a continuous stream the procession would never end?'

'I did hear something of the kind,' replied Daniel with a slight smile.

'Very funny,' said Scoop pouring some whisky into his already half-full glass.

'Why Buckingham Palace?' asked Nancie.

'What do you mean, why Buckingham Palace?' said Scoop.

'Why do all those Chinese have to go past Buckingham Palace? Why not Marble Arch?'

'All right,' said Scoop, beginning to get exasperated. 'Let's make it Marble Arch then.'

Nancie looked somewhat confused but left it at that. The waiter brought the bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice and laid two glasses on the counter.

'I think it is quite cold, madam. Would you like me to open it now?'

'Why ever in the world not, darling!' she exclaimed. The waiter grinned and opened the bottle, the cork coming out with a loud report.

'Who was it said that the popping of champagne corks was the artillery of success?' asked Scoop.

'You did, darling,' replied Nancie.

'No, I just plagiarised it, me darling.'

'There you are, I told you it was yours. You're a genius in a world of idiots.'

The waiter poured some champagne into the two glasses on the bar. Nancie did not bother to ask Scoop if he would like some, for she knew that he would only turn his nose up at it, whisky was his drink and that was all he drank.

Nancie had quite a thirst for champagne; she sipped it down daintily like lemonade and sometimes drank three glasses of it to Daniel's one. And it made her drunk. Daniel rather dreaded this because sometimes when she got drunk she wanted to marry him, the fact that she was married already making not the slightest difference to her.

'Darling,' she would slur. 'Tomorrow we will get the licence at Caxton Hall!' At this, Daniel would smile. Whereupon she would demand to know what he was laughing at; whereupon he would point out the small fact that she already had a husband. This always drove her into a blind rage, which only more champagne would pacify. If, by some dreadful circumstance, she began her matrimonial advances in a place where there was no champagne to be had, she would make a great scene; sometimes she could be pacified with a little gin, but invariably this made her cry.

Daniel remembered one horrifying occasion when she proposed to him when she was sober. For a moment he had been too thunderstruck to reply.

'I can get a divorce,' Nancie had continued, not waiting for his reply. 'I talked it over with my lawyer last week and he said that I could get a divorce on cruelty grounds.'

'What on earth do you mean?' Daniel had exclaimed.

'Your old man has never been cruel to you. In fact you will have to wait a long time before you will find anyone as kind as he is.'

'I know that, silly,' she pouted. 'What my lawyer suggested was that I provoked him until he was cruel to me, and then went straight round to my doctor and get him to witness the bruises.'

'Well, that's charming, I must say,' laughed Daniel. 'Poor old bastard.'

Nancie did not see the joke and was most upset when Daniel said that he did not wish to pursue the matter any further.

Scoop O'Toole had now had as much to drink as he needed to write his piece for his paper. He said that he had to be off, though he would very likely be back when he had finished work, which would be in about an hour and a half, for a night-cap or a morningcap, depending on whether you happened to be a stickler for time. With that he slid off his bar stool and ricocheted from one wall to the other until he eventually got to the door, where Joe, the doorman and friend, caught his arm and led him gently out into the street and hailed a cab, into which he piled Scoop.

There was hardly a cab driver in the West End who did not know Scoop, so it was therefore not necessary for them to be given an address at which to deliver the gusty Irish journalist. Unless otherwise authorised, they drove him to his office off Fleet Street; nor did they worry if he did not have the fare, for the chances were they would see him again the next day anyway, in any event by the end of the week.

It was now about eleven thirty and the Vulture Room was beginning to fill up with the theatre crowd, with young debs in the company of sickly-looking young men wearing immaculate evening suits, farmers up for the Dairy Show at Olympia, fat wealthy women with chubby-faced teenage boys in tow, a brace of cackling old queens, one of whom was wearing a ginger wig, a smattering of lesbians and prostitutes in the company of their ponces, just the usual old crowd.

'Darling, order another bottle of champers,' demanded Nancie who was beginning to look a little bedraggled.

'But of course, my dear!' exclaimed Daniel, attempting to impersonate George Sanders without any success whatever. He snapped his fingers and the barman hurried over.

'Tavener, would you kindly bring this "drunken bum", I mean "charming lady", another bottle of Krug 1959, and look very sharp about it?'

She had not heard him, which was just as well, though he could not have cared one way or the other.

'Certainly, sir,' smiled the barman and hurried away. He was a very knowledgeable man in the ways of drinkers. He saw all, knew all, but said nothing. He had his own troubles. In a trice he was back with the bottle. Nancie, who had begun by sipping the sparkling liquid, was now soused and guzzling it down like beer. Daniel liked her to get drunk provided she did not propose to him, especially at parties where there were plenty of men who would throng around her like drones around a queen bee. Some of the younger men who were still smothered in principles, morals, ethics and innocence fell in love with her whilst the elder ones, who had long since given up such refinements, simply lusted after her.

Nancie adored them all. Her orifices were open to all men. She was a virgin in her right earhole and a *demi-vierge* in her left! Daniel wondered if they all got presents of diamond cufflinks, gold watches and cigarette cases.

It was to such a party that they went next, in a luxury flat in Knightsbridge, given by one Lady Boyce-Liskeard known to her friends as Bobby. She was a legend in her own lifetime, and even though she was now sixty-two she was not entirely past it. She was extremely wealthy and owned several important pictures, among which were a Bacon 'Pope', two Picasso drawings, a sketch of herself drawn by Matisse with whom she said she had an affair in 1920. There were also a Paul Klee or two and a Van Gogh in her collection.

Bobby dearly loved to give parties for the young things

about town and without fail she invited Nancie, because she felt that they were kindred spirits.

'Darlings,' gushed Lady Bobby as they entered the room. 'I want you both to get frightfully drunk and enjoy yourselves!' The plush apartment was already half-full of guests, jabbering away to each other as though their very lives depended on how many words they uttered per minute. Though Daniel knew several of the people present, Nancie appeared to know every single one of them and it took her some time to kiss them all. There were, of course, writers and poets, painters and sculptors among their number but there were also playboys, party girls, diplomats, actors and a few members of the *nouveau riche*, who were almost gentlemen, but not quite. There were also a few journalists from the gossip columns who always attended Lady Boyce-Liskeard's parties at which they had a field day.

As the evening wore on the guests got drunker and the party got wilder. Nancie was in her element. She had cornered five young men with whom she was flirting gutlessly. Daniel stood a short distance away talking to a young starlet who was at the moment involved in a sensational divorce case which, according to her, was doing her career no harm whatever. In fact she was in the process of telling Daniel that a film producer had seen her photograph in a national newspaper and had given her a part in a new film that he was making in the Greek islands. Though Daniel had made a mental note about getting her to bed sometime in the near future, he did not find her conversation especially scintillating. He was far more interested in the antics of Nancie.

'But, darling, you're so handsome,' she purred, patting a young man on the cheek. Daniel smiled to himself as he watched him flush very red.

'Don't be embarrassed, darling,' gushed Nancie. 'You're the most attractive boy here tonight.'

The young man went even redder and began to shuffle his feet. 'Isn't he sweet?' she laughed. The other men laughed

dutifully but were very envious. Suddenly she noticed Daniel watching her and winked at him and blew him a kiss. The men turned and glowered at him.

A drunken writer, whose first book had just been published and who had won the Somerset Maugham Award, staggered over to where Nancie was standing.

'Hello, darling,' he said without introducing himself. 'Do you fuck?'

'Not till I met you, you smooth-talking bastard,' replied Nancie completely unruffled. The young writer was so dumbfounded by her reply that he just staggered away again, no doubt to try out his charms on someone more vulnerable.

By three in the morning, many of the guests having bored each other enough for one night began to go home. Nancie was now so drunk that she could hardly stand, and in fact would have fallen over had she not been clinging to the handsome young man for support. 'I want to lie down,' slurred Nancie, and the young man led her out of the room.

Now that there was more room Daniel had settled himself on a couch next to Lady Bobby and was talking to her about her young days in Paris and how much she regretted their passing. He could well imagine Bobby in her younger days. The lines of experience were deeply etched on her face; there was a sophisticated awareness in her manner that inspired confidence; everyone went to her when they were in trouble and her advice was always sound. Though in some ways she was an old bag she had the majesty of royalty: she was a queen among whores.

Lady Bobby was telling Daniel an anecdote about the night she fell in love with Henry Miller, whom she remembered was at the time halfway through writing *Tropic of Capricorn*. Daniel glanced around the room and noticed that Nancie and the young man had disappeared.

'He really was the most divine man, so young and completely uninhibited. We spent the night in a little hotel in Montparnasse and Jean Genet came around in the morning

for breakfast and stole my handbag. . . .’ Daniel was not listening to her; he seldom bothered to listen to her fantasies. If Henry Miller was young then, Daniel was well aware Genet would not have been born. He, like all supposedly broad-minded men, was angry and jealous, for he was well aware what Nancie was up to with the handsome young man.

Rudely Daniel excused himself whilst Bobby was still boasting of her amorous exploits among the Paris set of the twenties. She was in mid-sentence when he got up from the couch. The flat was large but Daniel knew his way around well enough. He went directly to the door of Lady Bobby’s bedroom for he knew that on the other side of it he would find Nancie and her young lover. He threw the door open and there, lying on the bed, was Nancie with her dress pulled up over her thighs and her legs spread wide apart. The handsome young lover whirled around in Daniel’s direction and upon seeing him zipped up his fly with such speed that he caught a tuft of pubic hair in it. A look of anguish appeared on his face but he made no sound. Without a word he got up from the bed and rushed out of the room. Daniel closed the door after him, walked over to the bed and lay down next to Nancie.)

‘You’re a filthy bitch,’ he said, kissing her lightly on the lips.

‘I know, darling,’ she slurred, forcing her wet tongue into his ear.

At five in the morning they left the party arm in arm and went back to her place, and fell into a drunken stupor from which they did not regain consciousness until the following afternoon.

Chapter Three

Scoop O'Toole had been trying to reach Daniel by phone all the morning in order to invite him to go with him to a society wedding that he had been asked to write a piece about for his paper. He was not really very keen to go because the bride had once been a lover of his. Actually she had rung him up personally and insisted that he come, whether he was covering it for the paper or not. This was not the first time that Scoop had found himself in this situation, but each time it had amazed him. Why, he wondered, did ex-lovers ask you to their weddings? Was it to show off? Scoop had a different theory. It seemed to him that, once an affair was over, girls simply blotted it from their minds, and you became just a friend that they once knew. Their feelings became purely platonic, though it was impossible for Scoop to connect the name of Plato with many of the girls with whom he had been in love, who had subsequently invited him to their weddings to other more worthy men.

Scoop guessed that Daniel must be with Nancie and, although he knew the phone number, he did not ring because he was well aware that this would only cause no end of trouble for Daniel, for Nancie would have had hysterics if she had known that Daniel had talked to anyone about their affair. This is an odd thing about women like Nancie for, although they like to have sex with any man that they may meet, they are liable to try and keep it a secret from their husbands and neighbours to whom they have always been thought of as a paragon of virtue.

Not having got hold of Daniel he had had to go to the wedding on his own and much to his amazement he had enjoyed himself. The reception had been given in the penthouse at the

Carlton Tower, and there was a great deal of booze about simply waiting to be drunk. Scoop phoned the story in early, such as it was, which wasn't much, and then he set about the business of enjoying himself, with his usual vigour. As the reception got under way he found himself in a corner with one of the bridesmaids, who turned out to be the bride's twenty-year-old sister. Scoop had taken her phone number and promised to ring her at the beginning of the following week.

The water from the shower gushed down onto Daniel's back with the force of machine-gun fire. It was ice cold, his skin tingled and his hangover eased its raging; it left his head like an evil spirit that had been cast out by a voodoo witch-doctor. He scrubbed himself from top to toe with Ceillet-Mignardise scented soap that Nancie's old man had especially imported from France. He came out of the shower smelling like a whore at a christening. Hurriedly he got dressed and having done so told Nancie that he had an appointment in town. She did not believe him but for once was too exhausted to argue about it.

'I'll give you a ring in the morning, darling,' said Daniel brightly.

'All right, sweetheart,' she groaned. 'And for God's sake don't slam the door on your way out.' But he did, vigorously, and the report split Nancie's head in two.

As Daniel walked in at the front door of his flat, the phone rang.

'Hello,' he said, in a guarded tone of voice.

'Good afternoon,' replied Scoop. 'And where have you been, may I ask, as if I didn't know?'

'Where are you?' asked Daniel.

'At the office. Why?'

'I just wondered if you felt like coming over for a drink?' said Daniel.

'Well,' replied Scoop. 'I've got to cover a boring murder of a housewife over in Paddington and I don't know how long it

is going to take. The law are looking for some negro whom they say can help them in their inquiries. They have issued an identikit picture of him. But I don't think it will help much, they all look the same to me.'

'Why don't you come over when you've finished and bring Frances with you? I'll get some food in for her to cook.'

'I haven't seen her for two days,' laughed Scoop. 'I wouldn't be all that surprised if she isn't talking to me.'

'Well, come if you can.'

'O.K. See you,' said Scoop ringing off.

Daniel went into his bedroom and lay down. It was a warm evening and the windows were open. As he lay there, he became mesmerised by the portrait of Virginia Rappe which looked down at him in a provocative sort of way. Suddenly, outside in the street, he heard the click, click, click of high-heeled shoes on the pavement as a girl passed by. To Daniel it was an erotic sound. He had a compulsion to rush over to the window and see what she looked like, but did not do so for fear of disappointment. Her footsteps sounded too beautiful to be spoiled by an ugly face or a fat behind. He listened to the footsteps until they had faded into the distance.

At seven o'clock Scoop phoned to say that he and Frances were on their way over. Half an hour later they arrived.

'What a day,' said Scoop, flopping into a chair.

'Did you get the story?' asked Daniel, and added, 'I've got nothing for you to eat.'

'Yeah, I got it all right,' replied Scoop. 'I saw the body as well. She had had her head cleaved in with a meat axe. It was a dreadful sight. I was nearly sick. Her husband was in tears. We got a nice picture of him for the early edition.'

'How old was she?' asked Daniel.

'Twenty-two,' replied Scoop. 'But not in very good condition. She had already had three kids, only a year between each of them.'

'What on earth will happen to them?' asked Frances.

'Don't ask me, sweetheart, I don't know. But I'd guess

that they will be put in a home. I don't think the husband will be able to take care of them. He's an ignorant labourer.'

'What a tragedy,' said Frances with a sigh.

'Whisky?'

'All right,' said Daniel getting up and crossing the room to the cocktail cabinet.

'Fine,' said Scoop. 'Just what I need.'

Daniel poured three glasses and handed them round.

Frances was wearing a black leather two-piece suit, the skirt of which was a little on the short side. When she crossed her thighs Daniel could see her stocking tops and an inch or two of snow-white skin. She knew that he could see but made no attempt to pull her skirt down. As yet Daniel had not been to bed with her, but he knew that she was on offer whenever he felt inclined to take her up on it. Like so many emancipated women she was as promiscuous as a mongrel bitch but, strangely enough, there was nothing degenerate about her. She simply liked sex and had it with whomever she pleased, whenever she pleased. She used men's bodies to satisfy her lust and then cast them aside. She fell in love only with men with good minds. She was their equal intellectually and, given the chance, she would discuss literature and art until the cows came home. Actually Scoop had once told Daniel that she was not really much good in bed, because she was made as big as a horse's collar.

'It is just like throwing a banana up Oxford Street,' said Scoop.

Scoop had also said that she was somewhat perverted and liked to torture her lovers if they would stand for it. This both frightened and fascinated Daniel, who in fact hated to be hurt physically though the idea of it excited him. Scoop had added that he thought she did it only for kicks, simply to relieve the boredom of her day-to-day existence. He also thought that her profession might have something to do with it. For, being an anthropologist, she preferred animals to humans and would have rather married a gorilla than a man, always supposing

that she could find one that would have her, which Scoop thought rather unlikely. Her greatest pleasure in life was to visit Guy the gorilla at Regent's Park zoo, with whom she had a kind of affinity. She had visited him so often that he had come to recognise her. When she came up to his cage he would smile at her and masturbate wildly whilst other women around the cage averted their eyes. Frances became transfixed by his huge member; her excitement was almost unbearable. In her love for wild beasts she had much in common with Daniel's stepmother but he never mentioned it to her.

Later in the evening Daniel suggested that they went to dinner at the Savoy Grill. Frances was particularly enthusiastic about going because Scoop hardly ever took her out to eat, and especially not to anywhere as expensive as the Savoy.

'Help yourselves to another drink,' said Daniel, getting to his feet and walking towards the door. 'I won't be a minute, I just want to change my shirt. Scoop, ring up and book a table, will you?'

'O.K.,' replied Scoop as Daniel went out of the room.

Frances poured more drinks, whilst Scoop rang up and booked a table in the name of Daniel Valler. 'Certainly, sir,' said a smarmy voice at the other end of the line. 'What time will you want it for, sir?'

'In about an hour,' replied Scoop and put the receiver down.

Daniel came back into the room having put on a crisp white shirt and an *art nouveau* tie which he had bought in Bond Street the day before, and of which he was rather proud. It was emerald green with a bright red design hand-painted on it. Studd and Millington's had had them especially imported from Paris and they were rapidly becoming all the rage. Daniel, predictably, was the trend-setter.

At the Savoy, Daniel surveyed the clientele. There were American tourists in abundance and a few members of the English nobility that he recognised; leaning against the bar was an internationally famous tough-looking, but otherwise

thoroughly useless, actor. He could almost smell him from where he was sitting. Completely deodorised and sexless, in his films he gave the impression of being a huge muscular brute with biceps a foot in diameter. In real life he was rather slight and seedy-looking. Daniel hated his guts on sight and had a burning desire to go over to him and hit him in the face without a word.

'Can we see the cabaret after dinner?' asked Frances.

'What?' replied Scoop in a slurred tone of voice.

'The cabaret. Can we see it?' repeated Frances. 'They've got Sammy Davis Jr over from America for two weeks.'

'I didn't know that you went in for that sort of thing,' interrupted Daniel. 'I thought your only interest in life was skulls. If you don't watch out you'll destroy your image.'

'If you must know—it's his head that I am interested in,' snapped Frances. 'It's such an interesting shape, don't you agree?'

'All right, all right!' exclaimed Scoop. 'If you want to see him so much, you shall.'

Having finished their drinks Daniel paid the waiter, over-tipping him as usual; they made their way to the grill room where the head waiter ushered them to a corner table, Daniel's usual table when visiting the restaurant. They had hardly begun their meal when the head waiter came over to the table and said,

'There is a phone call for you, Mr O'Toole.'

'Jesus!' shouted Scoop. 'You wasn't after telling them I was here?' His secretary knew his haunts well.

'I'm sorry, sir,' begged the waiter. 'But it's your office, and they say it's urgent.'

'What do you mean, urgent?'

'I don't know, sir,' the head waiter was becoming unhappy. 'They simply said that it was urgent and that they must talk to you if you were here.'

'All right!' bellowed Scoop hurling his knife and fork onto his plate. He got up and left the room.

'What a shame,' said Frances. 'I wonder what they want him for?'

'The Americans have dropped the bomb on Moscow?' suggested Daniel with a smile.

'I don't see anything funny about that.'

'Don't you really? You must admit that it would at least relieve the boredom.'

Scoop came back into the room and hurried over to their table.

'I'm sorry, me darlings, but I have to go.'

'What's up?' asked Daniel.

'The police have caught the coloured fella that done in that dear lady over in Paddington. I'll have to be seeing if I can get some sort of a statement from the police. Would you be after taking care of me little darling till I get back? Take her to watch the cabaret. I hope that I won't be long.'

'Of course I will,' smiled Daniel.

'And no funny stuff.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'Nothing at all. Well, I must be off. Tell the waiter I'll have to have me steak another time.' With a wave of his hand Scoop departed to find out all there was to know about the foul deed in Paddington.

For a time after Scoop had gone Daniel and Frances ate in silence. Somehow without Scoop to help things along they found that they had little to say to each other. Daniel had little time for emancipated women and Frances could not stand wasters like Daniel, at least that was her opinion of him. The truth was she considered Daniel to be something of a danger to her, for she could only hold her own with men who cared about literature, the arts and life. Daniel was clever all right, he did *The Times* crossword puzzle every morning in twenty minutes flat. But he kept his cleverness to himself. She could not compete with him because he would not compete with her. She had occasionally tried to get him into a discussion on one topic or another but every time he had refused to be drawn.

'Would you like a brandy?' Daniel asked, when they had finished eating.

'Why didn't you bring that girl friend of yours with you tonight?' asked Frances as she sipped her brandy.

'Which girl friend?' smiled Daniel.

'Nancie or whatever her name is,' said Frances.

'She's not my girl friend,' said Daniel. 'She's my lover. There's a big difference, you know.'

'Well, whatever she is, why didn't you bring her?'

'Because, my dear,' smiled Daniel, 'she is getting a little too fond of me for my liking. Do you know, I really think she is in love with me?'

'Poor girl,' replied Frances.

'What about poor me?' snapped Daniel. 'How do you think I feel?'

'Callous?'

'Come off it,' begged Daniel. 'Let's have another brandy.' And they had several, before they moved on to the cabaret, where Daniel had his special table.

Daniel ordered champagne and settled back to watch Sammy Davis Jr, who sang a dozen well-known songs better than anyone had ever sung them before, followed by an impersonation of Jerry Lewis which Daniel hated and one of Frank Sinatra which he thought was brilliant.

During the performance Daniel kept glancing at Frances and could tell that due to the drink and the surroundings she was beginning to melt. She laughed at Sammy's jokes and applauded wildly at the end of each song. Taking his courage in his hands, he placed his hand on her knee. For a moment she stiffened; their eyes met and Daniel smiled; she looked away quickly but did not remove his hand from her knee.

'Look down, look down, that lonesome road before you travel on. . . .' sang Sammy.

It was his final encore and soon the lights would be turned up. The palm of Daniel's hand began to sweat. Suddenly

Frances crossed her legs under the table, trapping his hand between them. She turned and looked at him and licked her bottom lip. He knew that he had made it and was filled with a dreadful excitement.

Miss Grandage, the lady who taught English, was the greatest tyrant that Daniel had ever met in his life. She had wild frizzy hair, a hooked nose and a long thin chin with tufts of bristly hair growing from it. She was very tall and very violent. She hated Daniel and rapped his knuckles with a foot rule so often that he had lost count long ago. Daniel was twelve when he was promoted to her class from a lower form, lower A, which was in the junior school. He had not been promoted for effort, it was simply a matter of age. He was old enough, so he was moved up. The Second World War was raging and the men had gone to fight, leaving the women to run the country and teach the young. But for the war, there would never have been a woman teacher in a boys' prep. school. Miss Grandage was a spinster of some fifty years, who hated men in a most unhealthy manner. In later years when Daniel thought about it he became sure that the reason was because she was hideous, and no other reason whatever.

The boy sitting at the desk next to Daniel was thirteen and named Ginger Harison. He had watery eyes and a hare-lip. He was despised by the sports master for being very slight and unable to kick a football. However, Miss Grandage loved him for he worked harder at his studies than anyone else and was always top of the class. The other boys bullied him because he was weak, ridiculed him because of his hare-lip, and hated him for being top of the class and teacher's pet. But Ginger was unperturbed by either their violence or jeering. In the playground many of the boys would follow him around yelling at the tops of their voices, 'Ginger, you're balmy. You'll never join the army' until they were hoarse.

Harison would completely ignore them. Eventually they

would get bored and go away, though not before they had hurled a couple of dozen stones in his direction. Daniel had always been amazed that Ginger did not seem to care if the stones hit him or not, because he never made any attempt to either run or avoid being hit. He simply stood his ground as the rocks hailed upon him.

One afternoon Miss Grandage had ordered the class to write an essay about a recent visit that they had made to the Tower of London. Ginger had, as usual, finished his long before the others and was fiddling about under his desk. Daniel watched him out of the corner of his eye and was astonished to see that Ginger was sticking pins into his legs and pulling them out again. What was even more amazing was that he was able to do it without drawing a single drop of blood. Ginger was completely unaware that Daniel was watching him and continued to stick the pins into himself, first in one leg and then in the other. Daniel was completely mesmerised.

After a while Ginger stopped sticking the pins into himself and put them in his pocket, from which he took out a length of thin white twine of the type used for tying parcels. Suddenly he opened the fly of his short schoolboy trousers and took out his cock. Daniel was so shocked at this that he quickly looked away and began to scribble in his exercise book. 'The crown jewels which are kept in the Tower are the most valuable jewels in the world . . .' but he could not concentrate. His gaze again wandered in Ginger's direction, who had tied a slip knot in the string and had slipped it over the end of his knob, and was pulling it as tight as he could. As a result the knob had become swollen and blue.

'Daniel Valler!' shouted Miss Grandage. 'Will you please be kind enough to get on with your work? And stop trying to copy Gerald!' (Gerald being Ginger's real name.)

'I'm not, miss,' replied Daniel.

'Don't argue with me,' she snapped.

'But, miss . . .'

'Don't lie, boy,' interrupted Miss Grandage. 'Just do as

you're told.' Ginger had hastily covered himself and was pretending to write in his exercise book.

'The jewels are guarded by the Beefeaters who search the Tower every night to make sure that there are no burglars hiding anywhere', wrote Daniel in his exercise book, and then glanced in Ginger's direction who, thinking that it was now safe, was continuing to mutilate himself.

'Gerald, what have you got under your desk?' called Miss Grandage from the front of the class.

'Nothing, miss,' squeaked Ginger, stuffing his cock and the string into his fly and desperately trying to do the buttons up.

'Come here, Gerald,' said Miss Grandage.

By this time the whole class had lost interest in the Tower of London and were staring at Ginger. Surely teacher's pet was not finally to get his come-uppance? Ginger did not move from his desk. He had gone very pale and began to tremble violently.

'Come along, Gerald,' repeated Miss Grandage. 'I want you to run an errand for me.' Upon hearing this the class lost interest in Ginger and went back to their work except for Fred Bauer, the school bully, who gave him a violent kick on the shin as Ginger passed his desk.

'Gerald, I want you to take these reports to the headmaster's office for me,' said Miss Grandage.

'Yes, miss,' chirped Ginger who was rather pleased that he had not been caught trying to execute his tiny weapon. He was about to dash away with the pile of papers that Miss Grandage had handed him. Suddenly she looked down and noticed the end of the twine hanging from his fly.

'What is this, Gerald?' she asked, reaching down and giving the string a tug, which in turn jerked poor Ginger's cock into view.

'Eeeeeeeou!' screamed Miss Grandage as she jumped back. The boys had now renewed their interest in Ginger and were staring goggle-eyed at his member round which the twine was still tied. It was a sight that Daniel never forgot. There

stood Miss Grandage holding one end of the string whilst the other was attached to Ginger's cock. Still holding her end she dragged Ginger behind the blackboard out of sight and dismissed the class.

There was great excitement in the playground that evening and Ginger Harison immediately became the school hero, though he was not around to enjoy it. In fact, he was expelled from the school and Daniel never saw him again. There was much speculation about the fate of Ginger. If he had been caned Daniel was sure that Ginger would have been delighted.

At three in the morning Frances and Daniel left the Savoy. Frances insisted that they go back to her place, much as Daniel had tried to dissuade her, for at all costs he felt that he must avoid upsetting Scoop, not that he would be particularly angry even if he caught them in bed together. It was all a matter of ego; provided they could finish the affair on their own terms, all well and good. But even if the relationship was virtually over and another man came along, the present lover invariably became possessive. Which is why many wives take a lover, when their husbands begin to lose interest in them. And they are really quite delighted when they are found out because husbands very often become as ardent as they were on their honeymoon when they discover that their wives are attractive to other men.

They entered her front door and Frances led the way to the lounge. Daniel flopped into an armchair and looked around the room. Though Scoop had given him a description of the flat, Daniel had never been there. Frances's taste was entirely different from Nancie's. Whilst Nancie was all satin and lace, Frances was all hessian and bones. On the walls there hung savage-looking African masks which glowered down at Daniel ferociously.

'Would you like a drink?' asked Frances.

'I think I've had enough,' replied Daniel. 'But I'll have

one just the same.' She poured out two glasses of brandy and brought them over to where Daniel was sitting.

'Cheers!' said Daniel taking one of the glasses from her hand. Frances perched herself on the arm of the chair and began to stroke his hair. He could not bear to have girls messing about with his hair but did not stop her from doing it. Instead he reached for her hand and kissed it.

'Shall I put a record on?' she asked. 'I've just bought the latest Ray Charles L.P.'

'If you like,' replied Daniel.

She crossed the room to where the record player was standing in a corner and put the disc on the turntable. Suddenly the room was filled with the sound of the negro's gravelly voice. Frances came back to where Daniel was sitting and pulled him to his feet.

'I feel like dancing,' she said throwing her arms round his neck. Daniel pulled her close to him and kissed her savagely on the lips. Her tongue flicked in and out of his mouth like a lizard catching insects. He tried to manoeuvre her towards a couch a million miles away on the other side of the room.

'No,' she whispered. 'I'm not fixed up. Let's dance.' Dancing was not Daniel's forte but he did his best to move in time with the music. Ray Charles sang 'Alabamy Bound', 'Georgia on My Mind', 'Mississippi Mud' and 'Moonlight in Vermont', by which time Daniel had her against the wall and was groping her furiously.

'I won't be a minute,' said Frances pulling away from him. 'Pour yourself another drink.'

She went into the bathroom where she donned her Dutch cap and swallowed four birth control pills for good measure. She came back into the room to find Daniel stark naked with a glass of brandy in his hand. She turned the record over and took him in her arms.

'Bed?' said Daniel.

'No,' replied Frances. 'Let's do it here. I like it better standing up.'

She eased her leather skirt up above her thighs and Daniel went at her savagely.

'Take it easy,' she groaned. 'Where's the fire?'

Daniel made no reply. Scoop had been right. It really was just like throwing a banana up Oxford Street. A couple of hours on the alum pot would have done her no harm whatever.

Chapter Four

Scoop rang up at lunch time whilst Daniel was in the bath and asked to meet him at El Vino's for a drink. Daniel did not feel much like drinking but said that he would go anyway, because he couldn't be bothered to say no. No sooner had Scoop rung off than the phone jangled again. It was Nancie wanting to know his every movement of the night before.

'I went to bed early,' said Daniel.

'But I rang you at ten o'clock.'

'I must have been asleep.'

'You must be joking. You have never been in bed at ten o'clock in your life, unless it was for sex.'

'Look, don't start. I'm not in the mood,' said Daniel. 'I can't talk to you now, I'll ring you later.'

Before she could reply he blew her a kiss and rang off.

Scoop was leaning against the bar in El Vino's drinking his sixth Scotch of the day as Daniel came through the door. Frances was standing next to him wearing a tatty-looking marmot coat, and looking like something the cat had brought in.

'Oh dear,' thought Daniel.

'Hello, Dan,' smiled Scoop. 'What are you going to have?'

'Pernod,' replied Daniel.

'Sorry I couldn't get back in time for the cabaret last night,' said Scoop. 'I got held up on the story. Frances says that Sammy Davis Jr was great.'

'Did they charge him?' asked Daniel.

'Who?'

'The negro.'

'Oh, him. Yes, they did, apparently he was having an affair with the married woman and killed her in a fit of jealous rage.'

'Typical,' remarked Frances.

The barmaid, whose attention Scoop had been trying to attract, suddenly came within range. He ordered a Pernod for Daniel and a whisky for himself. Frances, who had gone on the wagon for a couple of hours, had nothing. She was a marvellous actress for at no time did she give any indication that there had been anything between Daniel and herself the night before; she was a professional and he was glad of it.

'I bet the poor bugger will be convicted and spend the rest of his life rotting in a cell,' said Scoop taking a gulp of whisky from his glass. 'You know,' he continued, 'I bet she was as much to blame as he was. In fact I bet it was her fault entirely.'

'Sounds likely,' replied Daniel without much interest.

'That's men all over,' said Frances crossly. 'You always blame the woman.'

'And why not?' laughed Scoop. 'She led him on and then spurned him. He was in love with her and killed her. That's all there is to it.'

'You make me sick,' replied Frances but would add no more.

Scoop seeing that Frances was angry changed the subject rapidly. A little later she said that she must go home and do some writing; she was working on a thesis about prehistoric monsters which was not likely to advance science but did keep her off the streets during the daytime.

'I'll be around later,' said Scoop.

'Ring me first,' replied Frances and smiled at Daniel. 'Now, you boys, behave yourselves and don't get drunk,' said Frances and was gone.

'Lunch?' asked Scoop as soon as she was out of the door.

'Where?' asked Daniel.

'Wheeler's,' said Scoop.

'Good,' replied Daniel and they left El Vino's to the hard-drinking journalists of Fleet Street.

Daniel had often thought about the futility of his day-to-day existence. His father had left him an income of ten thousand a year, which Daniel was to receive on his twenty-first birthday. He was now twenty-five and had not done a stroke of work in his life, and had not the slightest inclination to do so. He was a self-employed slave. His father had tried hard to interest him in the family business but all his efforts had been futile. He had not been much interested in Daniel, until Hatty had been killed in a car crash. She was in the company of a young man who was her lover; he had perished with her. 'Maybe,' Daniel had thought at the time, 'they will continue the relationship in Hell!' From the moment of her death Charles Valler's only interest was in his son. He wanted to make up for all the years that he had neglected him, but the harder he tried the less success he had, for Daniel despised him and had utter contempt for his efforts to win him over. Three years later he too died, of a sudden heart attack, a lonely and disillusioned man.

He had left everything to Daniel. There was no one else to leave it to. His father's lawyers sold up everything and invested the money for Daniel, thus leaving him completely secure for life. Daniel's friends envied him his freedom, but he simply took it for granted. He was always a few thousand overdrawn at his bank but had ample securities to cover the overdraft. Though Daniel was always surrounded by people, he felt entirely alone; he had affairs by the score but all he had to show for them was a small book full of telephone numbers.

Often when he got home drunk in the early hours of the morning Daniel would thumb through the book in search of a sympathetic, not to mention loving, ear. One night he lay on his bed thumbing through the book and came across a faded number written in pencil. He could not remember when he got it or from whom, it simply read: Joyce BAY 0473. Daniel lit a

cigarette and picked up the receiver. The bell at the other end of the line rang ten times, eleven times, twelve times, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. I'll let it ring two more times, he thought: Burr burr . . . Burr burr . . . just two more. Burr burr . . . Burr, click.

'Hello?' said a sleepy voice.

'Joyce, is that you?' asked Daniel.

'No. Who is that? What do you mean by ringing me up at this time of night?'

'Is Joyce there?'

'She moved out six months ago. Who is that?'

'My name is Daniel, what's yours?'

'I don't see what that has got to do with you. How dare you ring me at this hour!'

'It's not late.'

'What time is it?'

'Only twelve o'clock,' lied Daniel, looking at his gold watch and deducting two hours and twenty minutes. 'Talk to me for a few minutes,' he begged.

'Are you all right?' Her voice had softened ever so slightly.

'I think I am going to die.'

'Why?'

'Life.'

'But why?' She was now fully awake and interested.

'It stinks, that's all. It stinks to high heaven!'

'You're just lonely, that's all.'

'What is your name?' asked Daniel.

'Alethea.'

'What a beautiful sound. Have you a lover with you?'

'I wouldn't be talking to you if I had, would I?'

'Sorry. You must forgive me. I'm drunk. I meant, do you have a lover? I mean not there, but somewhere?'

'I have given them up.'

'Surely not. Who can live without love?'

'Me. It is too spiteful.'

'Are you in bed?' asked Daniel, lighting another cigarette.

'What do you mean, am I in bed? Of course I am!'

'Don't be angry. What colour is your hair?'

'Don't be silly.'

'I'm not being silly.'

'Mouse.'

'Are you beautiful?'

'I don't know.'

'Of course you do. All girls know when they are beautiful. I'm hideous.'

'Are you? Looks are not everything, you know.'

'I'm ugly, and nobody loves me,' tears came into his eyes and trickled down his cheeks. 'Can I come over? What is the address?'

'I have to go to work in the morning. What time is it?'

'Late,' said Daniel choking back the tears.

'Why don't you go to sleep? You'll feel better in the morning.'

The burnished copper idol on the bedside table grinned at Daniel mockingly.

'I want to make love to you,' he cried.

'But you don't know me.'

'Are you naked?'

'I'm wearing a nightie.'

'I love you more than anything in the world.'

'Don't be silly.'

'Don't keep on saying I'm silly. I'm not silly.'

There followed a ten-second pause. Daniel took off his trousers.

'Are you there?' she asked.

'I'm stroking your soft thighs.'

'If it pleases you.'

'You're wonderful . . . Kiss me.' Another pause, this time at her end of the line.

'You're depraved!' she gasped at last.

'You're marvellous.'

'Stop it!'

'Please don't go, I'm coming.' She said nothing but did not ring off.

'I hope you don't get pregnant,' said Daniel when it was done, and rang off.

When he awoke the next afternoon, he was horrified at what he had done. How could he have done such a thing? Was he not the most tasteful of men? But where was the point in worrying about it now? Should he ring Alethea and apologise for his disgraceful behaviour? No! Perhaps she thought that it was all a dream, after all girls had dreams like that as often as men did. It was better to forget it, so he did.

Daniel rang Nancie and made an excuse so that he would not have to see her that day. The truth was that he would not have minded very much if he could have got out of seeing her ever again, for she certainly had caused him more aggravation than was permissible under the stringent rules that were precisely laid down in his mind, pertaining to girls with whom he had affairs. If a relationship could not be run according to his rules, then he would prefer it to end without delay. The affair must at all costs cost him nothing; in a nutshell, that is all he demanded. He must be forgiven no matter how badly he behaved and his infidelity was, as far as he was concerned, none of their business; he was a free agent and could do as he pleased. The lovers, however, must do as they were told without complaint; he was the master and they were slaves. With this philosophy it is not surprising that his love affairs did not last long. Not surprising, that is, to an onlooker. To Daniel, however, it was a perfectly reasonable outlook. He was always amazed when he came across women who refused to comply with his wishes.

Daniel and Scoop had a prolonged lunch at Wheeler's, the last hour of which was spent in drinking brandy and smoking a foot-long cigar apiece. At three forty-five Scoop called for the bill, signed it and they left the restaurant, hailed a cab and

told the driver to take them to The Wig and Pen club in the Strand in order that they might continue their afternoon's drinking. That evening there was to be another party at Lady Boyce-Liskeard's. She had sent Daniel an invitation and he had R.S.V.P.'d by phone saying that he would be there. Having told Nancie that he could not see her that day he had had second thoughts about going, for if he had he would have been sure to run into her. However, having got somewhat drunk, he had decided that he did not care if she was there or not, he would go anyway.

At eight o'clock Daniel announced in a slurred tone of voice that he was going around to Lady Bobby's and that Scoop should come with him.

'Jesus,' said Scoop, 'I don't fancy it. In any case, I've got to call Frances.'

'You can tell her to meet us there,' suggested Daniel.

'But I don't like them sort of people.'

'So if you don't like it you can always leave.'

'Oh, all right then, but wait till I've phoned Frances.'

After Scoop had made his call telling Frances to meet him at the address that Daniel had given him, they left The Wig and Pen and set off for Knightsbridge in a taxi.

Daniel was very drunk and fell out of the taxi when it lurched to a halt outside the block of flats in which Lady Bobby lived. Scoop paid the fare, helped Daniel to his feet and they went inside, getting a nasty look from the doorman as they passed him. Daniel leaned on Bobby's bell; the door was opened by a pretty young thing that Daniel had not seen before. She had blonde hair, blue eyes, red lips and wore a mini-skirt. Much to her surprise Daniel threw his arms around her and kissed her full on the lips.

'You're the most beautiful girl I have ever met in my life!' shouted Daniel. 'Will you marry me tomorrow, by special licence?'

'How did you get so drunk?' she asked, pushing him away from her violently.

'I think it's all that whisky I've been drinking,' replied Daniel and barged past her into the lounge with Scoop following behind rather sheepishly. This was not his kind of place nor his kind of people. There was the usual mob of ladies and gentlemen congregated in the room. Lady Bobby sat on a sofa by the fireplace talking to the inevitable poet. Daniel staggered over to her and flopped down on the sheepskin rug at her feet.

'Have you met the finest man I have ever had the pleasure of knowing?' exclaimed Daniel waving his hand in Scoop's direction.

'Scoop, don't be shy. Come and kiss our hostess. She dearly loves to be kissed, don't you, Bobby darling?'

'You naughty boy,' smiled Bobby. 'You've been drinking again.'

'That's right, my love, and it's delicious.'

Scoop came over to where Daniel was lying and shook hands with Lady Boyce-Liskeard.

'Where's Nancie tonight?' she asked, looking down at Daniel.

'In bed with her husband, no doubt,' laughed Daniel; for some reason he considered this remark hilarious and repeated it several times in a loud voice.

'Now then, darling, don't make so much noise,' soothed Bobby.

'Scoop O'Toole, the finest scribe in Fleet Street!' shouted Daniel ignoring Bobby's request for less noise, and added, 'I want a drink.' At that moment the blonde girl with the short skirt, who had opened the door to Daniel, came within range. Daniel reached out and grabbed her ankle. 'Let go of me,' she said icily.

'Don't be like that, my angel, otherwise I shan't marry you tomorrow.'

'Just let go of my ankle.'

'Come and talk to me, I'm lonely.' Daniel gave her ankle a tug which took her off balance, and with a shriek the girl tumbled on top of him.

'That's better,' said Daniel, pulling her close to him.

She struggled for a while and then gave up.

'Now, then, what, may I ask, is your name?'

'Alice,' she replied. 'My dress will get creased if I sit down here.'

'Who cares? I'll buy you a new one. In fact I'll buy you ten new ones.'

'I'll bet you will,' she replied with a smile. 'I've heard about you. You're Daniel Valler, aren't you?'

'That's right, my sweet. And what, may I ask, have you heard about me? Nice things, I hope?'

'It depends on what you call nice things.'

'What do *you* call nice things?' asked Daniel, putting his hand on her knee. '

'I don't know,' she replied brushing his hand away. 'Being rich I suppose, and having nice things.'

'You're sweet,' smiled Daniel, patting her cheek. 'You shall have lots and lots of nice things, starting with me.'

'I've heard you're not nice. People say that the streets of London are littered with girls you have discarded.'

'What people?' demanded Daniel.

'Just people.'

'Well, they are liars.'

'I didn't say it was true, I'm just telling you what I have heard.'

'Well, you don't have to take any notice of what people tell you,' said Daniel. 'Now go and get me a drink.'

'Don't you say please?' asked Alice.

'Please, please, please!' said Daniel kissing her on the cheek.

'That's better,' she said, and got up from the floor.

In the meantime Scoop had been mooning about in corners waiting for Frances to arrive and doing his level best not to get into conversation with any of the smart guests. Scoop was a dreadful snob. He simply could not abide posh people. Daniel on the other hand was in his element.

As Alice came back with Daniel's drink the door opened and Frances came in. She was wearing a gold silk suit and a shiny pearl necklace. She glanced around the room looking for Scoop, who was in a corner being talked at by a young man who was probably an intellectual. Scoop looked very uncomfortable. At last he saw Frances and made his escape. He was so pleased to see her that he threw his arms around her and kissed her, this being something that Daniel had never seen him do to any woman. Frances was somewhat taken aback by his demonstrative behaviour and asked him if he was drunk.

'Not really,' replied Scoop. 'Believe it or not, I'm pleased to see you.'

'That's nice,' said Frances, looking around the room. 'Who are all these people?'

'I don't know, me darling. They're friends of Daniel's.'

'Well, I don't like the look of them.'

Daniel got up from the floor and went over to where Frances and Scoop were standing. He left Alice sitting on the floor. She glared after him with blazing eyes. 'Hello there,' said Daniel in a slurred voice and kissed Frances on the cheek.

'So you've condescended to talk to us, have you?' remarked Scoop.

'What on earth do you mean? You know I love you both dearly!'

'But you love that little dolly bird more,' said Scoop.

'Come off it, Scoop. What's the matter anyway?'

'I just don't like you leaving me to the mercy of these kind of people. You know very well that I don't like phoney social-ites, degenerate sodomites and *poseurs*.'

'That's funny,' interrupted Daniel with a grin. 'I thought they were your favourite people. I never thought I'd see the day when you would change your wicked ways.'

'I simply can't stand parasites, that's all,' snapped Scoop.

'Now come on you two, don't have a row,' said Frances.

'So who's rowing?' asked Scoop. 'I just don't like being deserted by my friends, that's all.'

'What are you getting so self-righteous about?' demanded Daniel, slightly losing his temper. 'You can't even satisfy your own lover!'

'What do you mean by that?' asked Scoop loudly.

'Never mind,' said Daniel, realising too late that he had said the wrong thing.

'Come on, out with it,' shouted Scoop. 'I want to know what you meant by that remark!'

Several of the guests looked in their direction and began to take an interest in the brewing argument.

'Please, Scoop, don't let's have a scene,' begged Frances, trying to pour oil on the troubled waters.

'I just want to know what he meant by that remark,' bel-lowed Scoop. His virility had been questioned and nothing would calm him.

Daniel, who was now very drunk, grabbed a drink off a tray as the butler passed by, and emptied the glass in one great gulp.

'If you must know, I laid Frances last night,' said Daniel defiantly.

'You did what?' shouted Scoop.

'I'm sorry, but there it is,' said Daniel, now becoming somewhat sheepish.

Frances had gone very pale and there was fear in her eyes.

'Is that true?' asked Scoop, turning on her.

Frances made no reply.

'Well, is it?' screamed Scoop.

'You must believe what you like,' said Frances icily.

'You bastard!' shouted Scoop, lashing out at Daniel.

The blow caught him on the side of the head and he reeled backwards, crashing into the butler; a tray of drinks went sky-wards and smashed to the ground. Immediately the room was in an uproar. Girls began to scream hysterically, pandemonium broke loose. Scoop charged at Daniel, fists clenched and eyes ablaze with fury. In spite of his age he was still a powerful man and, when roused, was completely fearless. He

hit Daniel several times, knocking him to the ground. Lady Bobby was screaming so lustily that she fainted. Several men jumped on Scoop and after a time managed to restrain him. Daniel looked up at him from the floor; he was a sorrowful sight, blood poured from his nose and his right eye was rapidly swelling, he would have a beautiful shiner in the morning.

Having tasted blood Scoop became somewhat calmer. He stood there blowing like a cart-horse and had a rather boyish expression on his face. He had not raised his fists in anger for many years and was rather amazed at the damage that he had managed to inflict on Daniel. Though he was ashamed of what he had done, he could not help feeling secretly triumphant. Daniel raised himself to his knees and was helped to his feet by Alice on one side and Frances on the other. He was shaking with emotion, floods of tears gushed from his eyes like a fountain.

'Now look what you've done,' said Frances bitterly, glowering at Scoop. 'I hope you feel proud of yourself. You make me sick.'

'I'm all right,' choked Daniel. 'Just leave me alone.'

The girls let go of his arms and he stood facing Scoop.

'You can't hit me,' said Daniel.

Scoop made no reply.

'You are the best friend I have ever had in my life,' said Daniel walking away in the direction of the window. Suddenly, when he was several yards away from the two great sheets of plate glass, he ran forward and smashed both his fists through them. There was an almighty crash as the two window panes splintered and showered down upon him, severely cutting his hands and gashing his head. Blood spurted in all directions, drenching several guests who were within a six-foot radius of where Daniel was standing. He slumped to the floor and lost consciousness.

The guests stood around, gawping at Daniel's crumpled body, none of them knowing quite what to do next.

'Phone for an ambulance!' exclaimed Scoop suddenly to

Frances. She went over to the telephone whilst Scoop rushed over to where Daniel was lying, completely motionless. His face was very pale and the blood flowed from his wounds like water skipping merrily in a mountain stream. With each beat of his heart the flow was punctuated with little spurts. The blood from the gash on his head covered his face and mingled with the blood, now slightly congealed, that had come from his nose. He looked like a character from a Grand Guignol.

Scoop knelt down beside Daniel's motionless body.

'You bloody fool,' he whispered, cradling Daniel's bleeding head in his lap. 'You bloody idiot. What did you want to go and do a thing like that for?'

He took his handkerchief from his breast pocket and gently wiped Daniel's face with it, but within seconds it was as scarlet as a muleta. Scoop glanced around the room at the astonished crowd of sophisticates.

'I think the party is over,' he said grimly.

But they did not move. They stood there, transfixed.

'Go on!' shouted Scoop. 'Get out of here!'

The guests looked at each other and then went away.

Having phoned for an ambulance Frances went over to where Lady Bobby was slumped in an armchair. She was slowly regaining consciousness. Her eyes flickered open and she looked up at Frances with the expression of a hurt poodle on her face.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'My name is Frances.'

'I don't know you, do I dear?' asked Lady Bobby weakly.

'No,' said Frances, stroking Lady Bobby's brow.

'What happened, my dear?'

'Just an accident.'

'I remember now,' said Lady Bobby, trying to sit up straight.

'Just lie still.'

'That poor boy,' cried Lady Bobby. 'That poor, poor boy. Is he hurt badly?'

'No,' lied Frances. 'He'll be all right. The ambulance is on its way.'

Lady Bobby slumped back into the chair and closed her eyes.

The last of the guests had trooped out of the door, leaving only Scoop, Frances and Alice, who in an attempt to make herself useful began helping the butler to clear up the used glasses.

'Don't bother, miss,' said the silver-haired old gentleman. 'I can manage.'

He was completely unruffled by what had happened. For, although scenes like this were not a daily occurrence, they were by no means uncommon in this household. He remembered the actress who visited the flat the year before and had run mad for loss of her lover, and slashed her wrists in the bathroom. She had scars on her arms for every man that she had ever had sex with. They were lacerated from wrist to elbow, and were so unsightly that she kept them covered at all times. Then there was his employer, who was herself not above taking a gigantic underdose of sleeping pills every half-year, which took her to death's door but never beyond. There was also the young boy, a protégé of Lady Boyce-Liskeard's, who put his head in the oven, thinking that it was gas, only to find that it was electricity, and singed his hair slightly but was otherwise completely unharmed.

In the distance the clanging of an ambulance bell could be heard. Scoop glanced out of the window and then at Daniel lying in his arms. There were tears in Scoop's eyes. 'You always take the sweetest rose and crush it till the petals fall.' How did the song go? 'You always hurt the one you love!'

'Fucking hell!' exclaimed Scoop. 'Fucking, cunting, poxy, shitting hell!'

The clanging of the bell came nearer and louder. Suddenly Daniel's eyelids flickered and opened. Through the bloody gore he looked up at Scoop weakly. A wan smile touched his lips and was gone.

'Now then, Daniel, don't move. Help is on the way,' said Scoop soothingly.

Daniel's eyes closed again and suddenly he looked peaceful, as though Scoop's few words had acted as a sedative. Or he had died.

The ambulance screeched to a halt outside. The bell stopped its clanging and gave way to the opening and slamming of doors and shouts of:

'Which number flat is it, Bert?'

'Twenty-nine, I fink!'

'You got the stretcher?'

'Yeah. 'Ere, you get 'old of your end.'

'Ow many pair of 'ands do ya fink I've got? Can'tcha see I've got the first-aid box?'

'I dunno why people want t' go and try doin' 'emselves in on my early night orf. My life, I don't. Some people just ain't got no consideration for uvvers, that's wot I say.'

Scoop leaned out of the window.

'Do you mind packing in the blarney and coming up here before you have a dead body on your hands?' he shouted.

The two ambulance men looked up at him.

'Keep your 'air on, mate!' one of them shouted back. 'We'll be there in a minute.'

With that they disappeared into the front entrance of the block of flats. Several minutes later the doorbell rang. Alice opened the door and the two men trooped in.

'Where is he?' asked one of them, in a flat tone of voice.

Alice made no reply but pointed in the direction of the window.

The two men walked over to where Daniel was lying and put the stretcher down beside him.

'Cor blimey,' remarked one of them. 'E ain't arf in a state, ain't 'e?'

'I must say that is very observant of you,' replied Scoop dryly.

'So wot's 'e done to 'imself?' asked the other.

'Cut himself,' said Scoop drily. 'Tell me, are you going to stand there gawping at him all night, or are you going to rush him off to hospital before he expires entirely?'

'I don't like your tone, mate,' said the one named Bert, who was obviously the more senior of the two. With that he knelt down next to Daniel, who was no longer unconscious in the sense of being in a coma, but simply sleeping peacefully. Bert opened the first-aid box and took out some great wads of snow-white cotton wool which he put over Daniel's wounds and secured with thick bandages.

'Right,' said Bert. 'Let's get 'im on t' the stretcher.' The other man took hold of Daniel's shoulders whilst Bert took hold of his feet. Scoop stood up, his clothes drenched with blood right through to his skin.

'Gently now,' said Bert as they lifted Daniel from the ground and placed him upon the stretcher. Having achieved this without causing him any further damage, they lifted the stretcher, one at each end, and made their way towards the door with Scoop following behind.

The ambulance men had come up from the ground floor by the lift, but carrying the stretcher they had to descend by the stairs, four flights of them. This was to be no mean task, particularly if their passenger happened to be alive. Dead bodies were a different kettle of fish, for the odd bump or jolt was not felt by anyone but the grieving relatives and friends, as they watched their deceased loved one being carted away to the undertaker's shop or the mortuary. The man at the back lost his balance halfway down the last flight of stairs, there was a chain reaction, the result of which propelled both men and the stretcher down the rest of the stairs at top speed. It was a miracle that they did not drop the stretcher, Daniel and all.

Daniel was heaved into the back of the ambulance and Scoop asked if he could accompany them to the hospital. Bert, the foreman of the job, grudgingly agreed after Scoop had

flashed his press card. Frances and Alice, who were peering out of the broken window, waved to Scoop as he climbed into the back of the ambulance and watched it speed off up the street with its bell ringing loud enough to wake the dead. When the ambulance had disappeared around the corner at the end of the street, the two girls went back into the room to wait upon Lady Bobby whom, in their concern for Daniel, they had completely forgotten about for the past twenty minutes. She was still rather shaken and in need of another sniff of smelling-salts.

When, at last, Frances left the flat she took a taxi home. She wasn't in the least frightened of any retributive action that Scoop might take against her for her wanton behaviour with Daniel. Indeed, she rather liked the idea of being beaten by her lover as a punishment for her infidelity. Though at the time she had been greatly shocked by Scoop's attack upon Daniel, upon reflection she was both excited and fascinated by the spectacle.

At the Lucrezia Borgia hospital Daniel was admitted to the casualty ward amid a flurry of white-coated doctors and starched nurses. There was nothing casual about the casualty ward. All was efficiency reeking of disinfectant. Scoop had been told to wait outside the ward for news of Daniel's condition, but was later advised to leave by a rather stern sister, who informed him that Daniel had been taken to the operating theatre to be stitched up. He would be given a blood transfusion and was in no danger. She added the inevitable remarks about Daniel being a silly boy and very lucky not having cut himself either another inch to the right or to the left because in one direction he would have pierced his temple and would have died and in the other his eye and been blinded. Scoop was greatly relieved to hear this news, though the sister's remarks about Daniel being lucky aggravated him somewhat.

'Thank you, sister,' said Scoop, but could not resist adding, 'You are quite right. Daniel is indeed a very lucky boy after

all. He could have muscular dystrophy, cancer, smallpox and gonorrhea, but he hasn't.'

With that he smiled at the shocked woman, turned on his heel and marched out of the hospital into the early morning sunshine.

Chapter Five

At eleven o'clock Nancie rang Lady Bobby to find out how the party had gone and ask her out to lunch. For, although she had not attended the bun fight, she was exceedingly interested to know how it had gone and who had made love to whom.

'Darling,' said Lady Bobby in a very weak voice, 'the most dreadful thing has happened.'

'What?' giggled Nancie hoping to hear a nice piece of filth.

'It's that dear sweet boy.'

'What dear sweet boy, darling?'

'It's Daniel,' murmured Lady Bobby.

'What?' bawled Nancie. 'Who did he go off with? Come on, out with it, who was it?'

'It's not that, dear,' bleated Lady Bobby. 'He has been taken to hospital.'

'What on earth for?'

'He hurt himself. That is to say, his friend hurt him and then he hurt himself more.'

'I don't follow you, darling. What happened?'

'Oh, I'm so confused today. I don't think I remember what happened exactly,' cried Lady Bobby.

'Now come on, darling. Think,' begged Nancie frantically.

'All right. I'll try. He broke all the windows in the flat and cut himself.' Lady Bobby began to sob. 'It was absolutely frightful, darling. He had a fight with his friend and then went berserk. Absolutely berserk, my dear. You have never seen anything like it.'

'Who did he fight with?' asked Nancie.

'I don't know, dear. It was the man he came with. I think he was a journalist.'

'Was his name Scoop O'Toole?' asked Nancie.

'Yes, that's right, dear. A loathsome man. I don't know what Daniel is doing having friends like that.'

'Which hospital did they take Daniel to?'

'Lucrezia Borgia's, I think, dear,' replied Lady Bobby.

'Is he badly hurt?'

'He looked dreadful.'

'I simply must pop around there right away and see how he is getting on. I'll ring you later, darling.' With that Nancie rang off.

Daniel had spent four hours stretched out on the operating table. His hands and fingers had been severely lacerated and had to be stitched very carefully. The gold signet ring that he wore on the little finger of his left hand had to be cut away with a hack-saw, it fitted his finger so tightly that there was no other way of removing it. But had he been conscious he would not have minded. It had been a present from a girl. The girl had gone, the ring had stayed. The gash on his head was a clean cut and therefore not difficult to sew. The sewing session over, he had been taken to a private room. Scoop had left strict instructions that Daniel should have a private room which of course would be paid for.

When Daniel regained consciousness it was late afternoon. He looked around the room. He felt very weak and could not see very well due to the black eye that Scoop had given him. The walls were white and there were no pictures on them, the sun shone through the open window and there was the sound of traffic outside. A short time later a young doctor entered the room followed by a nurse.

'Well, how are you feeling?' asked the doctor, looking down at Daniel.

'What happened?' asked Daniel quietly.

'You were brought in last night, well, that is to say early this morning. You were in a frightful mess but you'll be all

right now. We gave you a blood transfusion and stitched you up as good as new.'

'Whose blood?' asked Daniel.

'I don't understand,' replied the doctor.

'Whose blood did you pump into me?'

'I don't know whose it was,' smiled the doctor, 'but you don't have to worry. It was the same group as yours and the same colour.'

Daniel did not appreciate the joke.

'I hope it wasn't female blood,' he replied softly.

'Why?' asked the doctor somewhat astonished.

'Because female blood is tainted,' said Daniel glancing at the nurse who let out a little gasp.

'What you need now is a little nourishment,' said the doctor, changing the subject. 'Nurse, pop down to the kitchen and get a bowl of soup, would you?'

'Yes, doctor,' said the nurse and left the room.

'I shall be in to see you tomorrow,' said the doctor. 'If there is anything you want, ring the bell. I'm sorry. Of course you won't be able to do that for a while,' he added, looking down at Daniel's hands lying limply on the bed outside the covers. They were swathed in bandages and looked like huge paws.

'I'll tell the nurse to look in on you from time to time. All right?' Daniel nodded his head. 'Good. Well, good-bye for now.'

With that he turned and left the room. A few minutes later the nurse entered the room again carrying a tray on which there was bowl of steaming soup and a spoon. She came over to the bed and laid the tray down on the table, her starched skirts making a crackly sound against her legs as she walked. Daniel looked at her as she moved around the room, first fussing with the bedclothes and then closing the window. He estimated that she was about twenty-two years old, her hair was brown and her uniform did nothing to flatter her figure. In spite of this he could tell that she was well proportioned and

that she had nice legs in spite of the thick stockings and ugly shoes she was wearing.

'Come along. Shall we have a little soup?' she said, addressing him in the plural.

'You mean both of us?' asked Daniel with a weak smile.

'Now then, don't let us be silly, shall we?' she replied, helping him to sit up.

'No, of course not. We mustn't do that, whatever we do,' said Daniel in a bored tone of voice.

'Now, Mr Valler, we must not be naughty, must we?'

'What a hope,' thought Daniel.

The nurse gently began to spoon-feed him. Actually Daniel rather liked the idea of being helpless. He would have to be fed, washed, shaved, have his teeth cleaned, toe-nails cut. Oh God, he thought, the bedpan! Was there ever anything more degrading than sitting on a bedpan? Still, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, he thought. Having finished half the soup he felt a lot better and did not want the rest.

'Come along now, there's a good boy. Let's try and drink it all up.' She was enjoying herself, Daniel could tell. He clenched his teeth as she tried to force another spoonful of soup down his throat.

'What on earth are you trying to do?' exclaimed Nancie as she came in the door.

Both Daniel and the nurse looked in her direction.

'Stop it this instant!' said Nancie in a commanding tone of voice as she crossed the room.

The nurse was so astonished by the sudden appearance of this frilly dressed lovely in a picture hat with an enormous bunch of red roses in her arms that she dropped the spoon into the bowl and splashed soup down the front of Daniel's pyjamas.

'Now look what you've done, you clumsy fool,' shouted Nancie. 'Would you kindly go away and leave us alone?' The nurse, completely disarmed, got up from the bed, put the bowl on the tray and hurried from the room. Daniel slumped back onto the pillows and would have laughed if he had felt up to it.

'Nancie, darling, you really are the limit,' he smiled.

Nancie placed the roses on the table beside the bed, together with several parcels she had brought.

'Darling,' she bawled, 'what on earth has happened to you? When Lady Bobby told me about it I nearly died; honestly I did. If things like this are going to happen to you, you will have to give up drinking.'

'Perhaps you would like me to get a job at the same time?'

'What a frightful idea,' she replied not realising that he had said it as a joke. 'Whatever put such a perfectly disgusting idea into your sweet head?'

She jumped onto the bed and gave Daniel a passionate kiss. The fragrance of the powerful Mitouko perfume she was wearing, mixed with the stench of hospital carbolic, almost made him faint. There was no way he could stop her. All he could do was lie there and wait until it was over. Upon reflection Daniel thought that being helpless had its disadvantages as well as its advantages. The kiss lasted for forty seconds. To Nancie this was a mere peck. She had nevertheless tried to force her tongue between his teeth.

'What on earth is the matter with you?' gasped Daniel as she ended the kiss with a resounding smack. 'Don't you realise that I am very ill?'

'Yes, my poor angel, but I'll take care of you, don't you worry.'

'Well, you can begin by wiping the lipstick off my lips. And please don't smother me, at least not for a few days. I just want to rest and think.'

'What about?' asked Nancie surprised.

'Oh, nothing much.'

'Oh, well,' replied Nancie shrugging the matter off. 'I looked in at Fortnum and Mason's on the way and brought you a few things. I bet the food here is absolutely disgusting.'

'I don't really want anything rich for a while,' he interrupted.

'Don't be silly, darling. I've only brought the teeniest pot

of béluga caviar. You know you like that. I'll ask the nurse to chop you up an onion and egg to go with it. You always have it like that, you're an absolute Philistine!'

She blew him a kiss and picked up one of the parcels from the table and tore the wrapper off it revealing a book with a lurid cover. 'And I've brought you a copy of *Histoire d'O*. I've read it from cover to cover. It's simply divine, darling, simply divine!' She tossed the book onto the bed. 'You must read it, if only to keep you in training for when you get out of here.'

'Look, Nancie, will you please stop camping it up all the time? I'm not in the mood for it,' whispered Daniel now completely exhausted. Before Nancie had time to reply the nurse appeared in the doorway.

'I'm sorry, madam, but your time is up. The doctor says that Mr Valler must rest,' she said politely.

'Please go, darling,' begged Daniel before Nancie had a chance to hurl a volley of abuse in the nurse's direction.

'All right, my angel, but I'll come again tomorrow.'

'Fine,' said Daniel.

With that, Nancie got up from the edge of the bed and flounced out of the room, giving the nurse a hostile look as she pushed past her. When she had gone the nurse came into the room closing the door behind her.

'Are you all right?' she asked, glancing at Daniel as she drew the curtains.

'I think I'm going to die,' he replied flatly.

'Not yet a while,' she replied, coming over to the bed and switching on the bedside lamp. 'People like you die of acute old age.'

'Is that a fact?'

'Yes.' She looked down at him and added, 'My God, are your lips bleeding?'

'No,' said Daniel, licking his bruised lips feebly. 'I told her to wipe the lipstick off and she forgot to do it. Do you mind?'

The nurse crossed the room to the wash-basin in the corner and took a flannel from a small cabinet on the wall, held it

under the tap and came back to the bed. Gently she wiped the smear of lipstick from his mouth, trying hard not to let her eyes meet his.

'I think I would like to go to sleep now,' he said gently when she had finished.

'That would be a good idea, Mr Valler,' she said, picking up the copy of *Histoire d'O* and placing it on the bedside table without looking at the cover. She then switched out the light and walked to the door, opened it and was about to go out.

'What is your name, nurse?' asked Daniel.

'Margaret Blood,' she replied.

'Good night, nurse Blood,' smiled Daniel. 'And thanks for everything.'

'Good night, Mr Valler,' replied nurse Blood, and went out of the door, closing it softly behind her.

Several times during the evening nurse Blood looked in on Daniel. He was in a deep sleep and looked very boyish and sinless. On one of her visits she took the huge bunch of roses from the table and arranged them in a vase of water and took them back to Daniel's room. It was her night for late duty and she was not relieved until ten thirty, when nurse Bleeding came on duty. Nurse Bleeding was no Florence Nightingale, on the contrary she was an ogress. She despised sick people and delighted in bullying them from morning till night. Her speciality was administering enemas to old age pensioners, who often died as a result of her cruelty, but the death certificate always read 'death by natural causes'.

She was six foot tall and very thin. She had a hatchet face and a long thin nose, hooked at the end like an eagle's beak; on the very tip was a small black birthmark with a thick tuft of hair sprouting from it. She was fifty-five years old and had been a nurse all her life and had seen death in all its guises. Somehow the smell of it followed her around wherever she went. She was a sinister woman, devoid of the milk of human kindness, one of whose delights was to watch dead bodies being wheeled to the mortuary to be carved up by medical students.

The poor woman had missed her vocation; she should have been the public executioner.

Daniel awoke early the next morning. He had fallen asleep at seven thirty the night before, the earliest he had done so in living memory. It was somewhere around five o'clock. The cold light of dawn showed through the curtains of his little room. He lay perfectly still staring at the ceiling. His head was throbbing and so were his hands, swathed in bandages. The full realisation of what had happened came to him in a blinding flash and hot tears rolled down his cheeks and were soaked up by the pillow. Where was it all going to end, he thought. It was a childish thought, he knew that.

'Oh God, the boredom of it all!' he choked.

Nurse Bleeding, who was doing her rounds, opened the door of Daniel's private room and peeped inside. She had eyes like a hawk and noticed that he was awake.

'Are you awake, Mr Valler?' she cackled.

'What?' mumbled Daniel surprised by the voice.

'Good,' said nurse Bleeding coming into the room and drawing the curtains. Daniel turned his head in her direction and was shocked at the sight of the grotesque woman. She came over to the bed and looked down at him. Daniel felt very small and insignificant under her gaze.

'And how do you feel this morning?' she asked grimly.

'Dreadful,' moaned Daniel.

'What's the matter?' she asked curtly, but there was a twinkle in her eye.

'My head is throbbing and my hands hurt,' replied Daniel.

The doctor will be along at nine o'clock. He will attend to you then.'

'What time is it now?' asked Daniel hopelessly.

'Ten minutes past five,' she replied glancing at a watch pinned to her uniform.

'But that is nearly four hours,' bleated Daniel. 'Where's nurse Blood?'

'I am nurse Bleeding. Nurse Blood will not come on duty

until nine o'clock. Come along now, do you want to use the bedpan?'

So this was it, the moment of truth. Nurse Bleeding left the room and returned with the bedpan which she carried as though it were a silver salver.

'Come along now,' she said, pulling back the bedcovers and untying his pyjama trousers. The ignominy of it all! But it would have been useless to complain or resist for nurse Bleeding was a determined woman. Daniel closed his eyes as she pulled down his trousers and raised him onto the bedpan.

'There you are, Mr Valler,' she said with a smile and left the room. Daniel had never felt so idiotic in his life. He strained his bowels almost to breaking point, the blood rushed to his head and pulsated in his temples, but nothing would come except for a resounding fart. After a while nurse Bleeding returned to wipe Daniel's arse and take away the bedpan.

'Well, Mr Valler, have you done your business?' she asked briskly.

Daniel made no reply.

'Come along, let's have a look,' she said helping him off the bedpan and pulling it away from under him.

'You haven't done anything!' she exclaimed glancing into the bedpan and then glaring at Daniel.

'I couldn't,' he groaned hopelessly.

'We shall have to see about that,' she said in an officious tone of voice.

'I shall have to report you to the doctor,' she continued as though scolding a naughty schoolboy. The prospect of giving Daniel an enema pleased her enormously, for she was always on the look-out for candidates to participate in her favourite pastime. True, Daniel was not a pensioner but he would come in very handy to practise upon. and in any case, she had become less choosy of late.

Mercifully nurse Bleeding was relieved by nurse Blood at eight forty-five, just fifteen minutes before the doctor was due to put in an appearance. Though there was a frightening

moment when nurse Bleeding whispered something to nurse Blood as the former was about to leave the room. Both looked in Daniel's direction. Nurse Blood smiled. With that, nurse Bleeding departed. Daniel hoped that he would never set eyes on her again, but it was a forlorn hope.

Nurse Blood had made a special effort to make herself pretty that morning. Instead of the thick black hose she wore sheer nylon stockings, a brief satin-lined suspender belt, pretty French panties named Francine, and a continental sling-bra with half-cups called Pompadour. Had Daniel known what her uniform was concealing he would have leapt upon her in spite of the fact that he was at death's door.

'And how are we this morning?' she smiled, advancing towards him.

'Dreadful,' moaned Daniel.

'What a shame,' simpered nurse Blood. 'Where does it hurt?'

'All over.'

'Perhaps when we have had a little breakfast we will feel better,' she said.

'I don't want any,' replied Daniel defiantly.

'But we must keep our strength up, mustn't we? Just a tiny glass of warm milk, eh?'

'All right,' Daniel smiled weakly. 'If we must we must.'

'There's a good boy,' she smiled back. 'And after that we must use our bedpan, mustn't we? Otherwise we will have to report ourselves to the doctor, won't we?'

Before Daniel could reply she had left the room in a flurry of skirts. He lay there on his back staring at the ceiling. It was less fun being helpless than he had at first thought.

'If you make me better and get me out of this, I will accept you as my saviour, devour my Bible and go to church every Sunday,' he murmured audibly.

The ancient Greeks, he had read, looked upon the sexual organs with pleasure and without inhibitions. The ladies disrobed at social gatherings and nothing was thought of it. Young

girls offered their maidenhead to the gods before the wedding night by riding erect male organs rampant from the loins of Priapus statues erected in public places. At weddings the bridegroom dressed as a woman and the bride as a man. It was the done thing. The young man wishing to look as lovely as his bride could do so without a single eyebrow being raised.

It was the French of all people who ordained pubic hair pornographic and instituted legislation making it illegal for even a wisp of it to be shown in public. This law has left its mark on erotic photographs that appear in magazines. Yet, how dreadfully sexless it is, to make love to a hairless girl.

Blood reappeared with the glass of warm milk.

The Greeks could not have been excited by silk panties, patent-leather high heels, suspender belts, rubber wear, leather skirts and black satin dresses, for they had not been invented in those dear departed days.

'Come along now, Mr Valler,' said nurse Blood. 'Drink this down before the doctor arrives.'

'I don't like girls, I only like frilly knickers.'

'Come along. Stop day-dreaming!' exclaimed nurse Blood.

'What?' grunted Daniel, suddenly aware of her presence.

'Oh, sorry I was miles away. What is it you want?'

'I want you to drink your milk up before the doctor arrives.'

'All right,' replied Daniel. 'Anything for a quiet life.'

With nurse Blood's assistance he raised himself on his elbows and took a swig from the glass. The sickly liquid filled him with nausea and made him retch. Daniel made a mental note about getting Scoop to smuggle him in a bottle of Scotch. It would do him far more good than all the drugs, medicines and serums medical science could provide.

A short time later the doctor arrived. He was wearing a white coat and the inevitable stethoscope dangled from his neck.

'And how do you feel this morning, Mr Valler?' he asked rather curtly.

'As fit as a fiddle,' Daniel lied.

'The nurse said that you were having some pain?'

'Only in my heart,' mumbled Daniel.

'What did you say, Mr Valler?'

'Not a word, doctor,' smiled Daniel.

'The nurse tells me you're constipated?'

'I am nothing of the kind,' replied Daniel defiantly.

'You must keep regular, it will hasten your recovery.'

'I am perfectly all right, thank you,' said Daniel.

'That's the spirit,' replied the doctor, glancing at nurse Blood who was hovering in the background. 'I think we had better change the dressings, nurse,' he continued.

'Yes, doctor,' said nurse Blood.

The doctor produced a pair of scissors from his top pocket and began to snip the bandages from Daniel's head. The lint covering the wound had fixed itself firmly to his skull and, though the doctor tried hard to remove it gently, Daniel found the operation very painful.

'I'm sorry,' said the doctor as Daniel winced. 'The blood has hardened,' was all he would say by way of explanation. Having removed the lint he peered at the cut.

'Oh yes, that should heal up very well indeed. I shouldn't think it will even leave a scar.'

'That's nice,' replied Daniel, his eyes watering profusely.

'Now let's have a look at your hands,' said the doctor. 'Nurse, would you give me a hand?' Nurse Blood came over to the bed and snipped the dressing from Daniel's right hand whilst the doctor dealt with the left. As with his head, the lint had stuck to the cuts and was painful to remove. Eventually the job was done and his lacerated hands were exposed ready for inspection. They were a grisly sight, a mass of black stitches. They looked as though they had been caught in a sewing-machine.

'What a mess,' sighed the doctor. 'You have been silly, haven't you?'

'And what, may I ask, do you mean by that remark?' asked Daniel hotly.

'I simply remarked . . .'

'I know what you remarked,' interrupted Daniel. 'Just do me a favour and don't start moralising. What is done is done, and that is all there is to it. All right?'

'Very well,' said the doctor, taken aback.

'People like you make me sick,' continued Daniel losing his temper. 'You spend your entire life capitalising on other people's misfortunes. To hear you talk, anyone would think that I smashed myself up on purpose and that I enjoy lying here listening to you telling me what a bad boy I am.'

'Calm down, Mr Valler. I am only trying to help you.'

'Fine,' exclaimed Daniel. 'You heal my body and leave my soul completely alone. Fair enough?'

'As you say, Mr Valler,' replied the doctor completely disarmed. He was not used to his patients answering back. Usually they became repentant when he told them what a trial they had been to him. Daniel's attitude was revolutionary, reminiscent of the psychiatric ward. During the rest of the examination the doctor remained silent apart from the odd grunt of approval or maybe disapproval as he investigated the damage. After a few minutes he stood up straight and without looking at Daniel left the room, instructing the nurse to apply clean dressings to the wounds. He slammed the door as he went out and a delighted smile appeared on Daniel's face.

'Now you've made him angry,' said nurse Blood reprovingly.

'What do you mean, I've made him angry?' snapped Daniel. 'I suppose it doesn't matter that he made me angry first?'

'You are in hospital and we have certain rules . . .'

'And one of them is not lecturing patients,' interrupted Daniel with a growl.

Nurse Blood did not want to enter into an argument with Daniel for she sensed already that if she had she would be on the losing side, that there were few people who were a match

for him in a row whether it be logical or illogical; he was a master of both.

Nurse Blood dressed the wounds and left the room, returning a few minutes later with a small glass of medicine.

'Come along now, drink this,' she said with a smile Daniel did not resist.

'What is it?' he asked as she poured the last of it down his throat.

'Laxative,' she laughed.

'You bitch!' shouted Daniel.

'I'll go and get the bedpan,' she said, ignoring the insult. 'That stuff works very fast.' With that she left the room again, returning an hour later with the bedpan.

Somehow Daniel did not find it as ignominious having his trousers taken down by nurse Blood as he had by nurse Bleeding. Nurse Blood was far more gentle and Daniel was sure she caressed his buttocks ever so slightly as she raised him onto the pot. Of course it could have been his imagination, but in any event her technique was so different from nurse Bleeding's that it was a pleasure to be touched by her.

'I'll be back shortly,' smiled nurse Blood heading for the door. 'Enjoy yourself, won't you?'

Daniel did not have the slightest idea what she meant by this remark. The laxative had surely not had time to get into his system, for it had only been an hour since she had poured it down his throat. Nevertheless no sooner had she closed the door behind her than Daniel let rip. The idea of having been given the dose was enough to set him off. He felt like royalty whom he had been told only 'went' once a week and did ever such a lot.

By the time nurse Blood came back into the room Daniel had completely emptied his bowels, and strangely enough felt a lot better for it.

'There's a good boy,' she said as she pulled the brimming receptacle from under him. 'The doctor will be pleased.'

Gently she wiped his anus clean with toilet paper and pulled

up his trousers. She then tucked him up in bed and left the room carrying the loaded bedpan with her, covered with a snow-white cloth.

By lunch time Daniel was bored to death. He could not read because he could not hold a book or turn the pages with his mummified hands, not that he was in the mood for the pleasures of *Histoire d'O*. *Treasure Island* or *The Young Visitors* would have suited him better in his present frame of mind. With great effort he managed to reach a set of headphones that hung on the bed rail behind him. But having got them in his paws he was not able to get them on his head, so he let them fall to the ground. Later, when nurse Blood came into the room, he asked her if she would put them on for him. At first she was reluctant and said that they might aggravate the wound on his head. But when she saw the look in Daniel's eyes she relented, picked the earphones up from the floor and put them on his head.

'We can only have them on for a quarter of an hour, then it will be our lunch time,' she said, leaving the room once again.

Daniel sat up in bed with the earphones on, looking like a wounded Battle of Britain pilot. The earphones were tuned to the B.B.C. Light Programme; a blues singer was wailing out the lyrics of a song entitled 'Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most'. It did nothing towards altering his morbid frame of mind.

Nurse Blood returned a short time later with his lunch which she laid down on the bedside table. Daniel glanced at the tray on which there was a plate containing mince meat, mashed potatoes and yellow peas. There was also a dish of watery-looking jelly. This was not the cuisine Daniel was accustomed to at the Caprice or Mirabelle. Nurse Blood took the earphones from Daniel's head and put them back on the bed rail.

'Now we must be very good and eat up every little bit,' she said sitting down on the edge of the bed and picking up the

plate of mince meat. 'Open wide,' she said, lifting a forkful of the muck to Daniel's lips. Daniel complied, but pulled a disgusted face as the revolting mess came into contact with his cultivated taste buds.

'There's a good boy,' she said as he swallowed the first mouthful without chewing it. Fork after fork entered Daniel's mouth until at last the plate was clean; this was followed by the jelly, the least said about which the better. Nurse Blood occupied the time taken in feeding him by telling him about an old man in the room next door who had died that morning of a heart attack.

'Are you sure he wasn't the mince meat?' asked Daniel.

'We are funny this morning, aren't we?' replied nurse Blood, wiping his lips with a paper napkin.

'How many people have died in this bed?' asked Daniel earnestly.

'I don't know,' she replied looking away.

'You must know.'

'I haven't been on this floor very long,' she went on, her face still averted.

'I know someone has died in this room recently,' said Daniel. 'I can feel death all around me.'

'Now we must stop being morbid,' said nurse Blood, getting up from the bed and picking the tray up. 'I think we ought to rest now,' she smiled. 'And we really must cheer up.'

With that she left the room.

At four o'clock Nancie arrived in the company of Scoop, who had insisted upon coming in spite of Nancie's objections. She had never been made love to on a hospital bed and had hoped to rectify this omission with Daniel's help that afternoon. The idea that she might be caught by a nurse or better still a doctor excited her enormously. As they entered Daniel's sick room he was dozing on his pillow. Nancie crept up to the bed and leaned over, kissing him lightly on both eyelids.

'Oh, nurse Blood,' murmured Daniel sleepily.

'Daniel!' exclaimed Nancie.

He opened his eyes and smiled at Nancie and Scoop.

'Who's nurse Blood?' demanded Nancie.

'Just a nurse, why?'

'I think you're in love with her.'

'Do you really?' replied Daniel. 'And what may I ask makes you think that?'

'You mentioned her name just now when I kissed you.'

'I must have been dreaming. Hello there, Scoop,' he said, changing the subject.

'Hello, Daniel. What a mess. I'll never forgive myself.'

'I should think not, either,' interrupted Nancie.

'It doesn't matter,' smiled Daniel.

'What was the fight about anyway?' asked Nancie.

'Nothing,' replied Daniel flatly.

'What do you mean, nothing?'

'What I say,' snapped Daniel. 'Now let's forget it, shall we?'

Scoop was glad that Daniel had passed the matter off as unimportant, though it did not ease his conscience in the least.

'Well, what have you two been up to?' asked Daniel.

'Nothing much,' replied Scoop.

'I bet,' said Daniel. 'I bet you were in the Vulture Room till all hours. What time did you get home?'

'Well, I was out on a job till three and popped into the club for a drink before I went home at about five,' said Scoop sheepishly.

'You'll never believe it but that was the time I woke up,' laughed Daniel.

'Did you eat the caviar?' asked Nancie.

'Not yet, darling.'

'Why ever not?'

'I just didn't feel up to it, that's all.'

'I hope you're not going to get frugal tastes whilst you're in here.'

'Don't let it worry you, darling. I will be as good as new in a few days.'

'Listen, I have a simply marvellous idea.'

'What is it?' Daniel's voice was guarded.

'Why don't you have yourself transferred to the London Clinic? They'll take far better care of you than they will here.'

'I would rather stay here,' smiled Daniel.

'Why?'

'I just would. It's not too bad.'

'It's that nurse, isn't it?'

'What nurse?' asked Daniel innocently.

'Blood,' exclaimed Nancie.

'My God, you really are the end, darling,' said Daniel. 'I have only been here one day and have spent most of that unconscious and already you are accusing me of having it off with the nurse. That really is charming, I must say. Don't you realise that I am very ill and couldn't raise an eyebrow let alone get a hard on?'

'I'm sorry, darling. It's just that I love you so much.'

During this exchange Scoop had not said a word. He had crossed the room and was looking out of the window watching the traffic jostling for positions.

'Come and talk to me, Scoop,' said Daniel.

Scoop turned from the window and crossed the room to the bed.

'What was the story you were on last night?' asked Daniel.

'Oh, nothing of interest,' replied Scoop.

'What's the matter with you?'

'Nothing, I'm just tired.'

'If you like, I'll ask the nurse to move another bed in here, so that you can have a rest cure,' laughed Daniel. 'How's Frances?'

'She's all right.'

'Good. You must bring her up to see me soon.'

'Yeah, all right, I'll do that.'

'Good.'

'If you don't mind, I'd like to talk to Daniel alone,' remarked Nancie looking at Scoop.

'Certainly,' replied Scoop. 'I'll wait for you outside.'
'Don't go!' exclaimed Daniel. 'You've only just arrived.'

Scoop hesitated, not knowing quite what to do.

'Please stay,' pleaded Daniel.

'All right.'

'I suppose I don't matter,' said Nancie angrily.

'I didn't say that, did I?' Daniel was bored with her and wished she would go.

'Well, I'm not staying while he's here,' she said, hoping that this would make Daniel send Scoop away.

'Have it your way,' said Daniel mildly.

'I will,' she said, and without another word got up and left the room.

'What on earth is the matter with her?' asked Daniel as she disappeared out of the door.

'She was rowing with me all the way here.'

'What about?' asked Daniel.

'You, of course. She reckons I'm a bad influence on you.'

'Well I never. That's rich, I must say. And I suppose she considers herself a paragon of virtue?'

The conversation, which up until this time had been stiff and cold, now relaxed and warmed up.

'Now you wouldn't be after having a drop of the hard stuff about your person at all at all?' asked Daniel in the worst possible impersonation of an Irish accent that Scoop had ever heard.

'Sure, it's a broth of a boy you are,' laughed Scoop producing a flask from his hip pocket.

'Have a look along the passage to make sure the nurse is not on the prowl.'

'Yes, of course. I should have thought of that myself.'

He went over to the door and looked down the passage in both directions and then came back into the room.

'All's clear. But just to be on the safe side . . .,' he glanced around the room then picked up a chair, stealthily stalked over to the door and hooked it under the handle. Then with-

out more ado they set about the business of consuming the contents of the flask.

'Cheers,' said Scoop holding the flask to Daniel's lips.

'Cheers,' replied Daniel, taking a gulp.

'Cheers,' repeated Scoop taking a swig himself.

The fiery liquid burned Daniel's throat but it was not an unpleasant sensation. By turns they took gulps from the flask until after a while someone tried to open the door.

'Hang on a minute,' shouted Scoop, bounding across the room and removing the chair from the door.

'Now then, what are we up to?' asked nurse Blood sternly as she came into the room.

'Nothing at all, to be sure,' replied Scoop turning on the fatal charm.

'I smell drink,' said nurse Blood menacingly, like the giant who smelt the blood of an Englishman. 'You have been drinking in this room and I shall report the matter to the doctor.'

'Now you wouldn't be doing a thing like that,' soothed Scoop.

'Why not?'

'Because that would get my dear friend Daniel into a lot of trouble.'

'It is against the rules to have drink in the hospital,' said nurse Blood.

'But the little drop we took was purely for medicinal purposes,' begged Scoop.

'Never mind, Scoop. I will take Nancie's advice and go to the London Clinic if she causes us any trouble,' said Daniel. He did not know what effect this was going to have on nurse Blood but was soon to find out.

'Listen, I'll give you one more chance,' said nurse Blood hastily. 'But if I catch you at it again, I shall have to report it.'

'Now that is very reasonable of you, I must say,' said Scoop with a smile, and then turning to Daniel, 'Don't you think that is very reasonable of the dear girl?' he asked.

‘Very,’ replied Daniel.

‘And now you will have to go,’ said nurse Blood, pointing to the door.

‘I’m on my way,’ Scoop grinned, and with a wave of his hand went out, closing the door behind him. A moment later he opened it again, popped his head into the room and shouted, ‘I’ll be back to see you again tomorrow,’ and was gone.

Nurse Blood had not addressed any of her reproving remarks to Daniel, but he was sure that now that Scoop had gone his turn had come. But she did not say a word to him either about the whisky or the door being barricaded, but she was obviously cross, for she moved about the room in an agitated manner.

‘I’m sorry, nurse Blood,’ said Daniel at last, not being able to stand the hostile silence any longer.

‘If the doctor found out what was going on in here this afternoon, I would be dismissed from the hospital,’ she stammered trying to choke back the tears.

‘I really am sorry, nurse. It won’t happen again, I promise. Please forgive me, it was very thoughtless of us.’

The nurse turned and looked at Daniel. He smiled at her and winked. ‘Honestly it won’t happen again.’

‘All right,’ she said coming over to the bed. ‘Let us just make sure that we don’t break our promise, that is all,’ she said, tucking in the bedclothes. Daniel had got slightly tight on the whisky and taking his courage in his hands he laid one of his bandaged paws on nurse Blood’s behind as she turned away from the bed.

‘Thank you, Margaret,’ he whispered, ‘you’re very kind.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ she replied walking away from the bed without looking in Daniel’s direction. ‘It’s all part of the service.’

At the door she paused and looked at Daniel; there was a radiant smile on her face.

‘I go off duty early this evening but I will see you in the

morning at breakfast time. Good-bye.' Before Daniel could reply she was gone.

When nurse Bleeding, wearing Directoire knickers under her uniform, came on duty, she was mortified to hear from nurse Blood that Daniel had done his 'business' in the bed-pan, but there was no point in crying over spilt sewage. Every dog has his day and she would have hers sooner or later, of that she was quite convinced.

'How are you feeling?' she asked upon entering the room.

'Not so dusty,' replied Daniel brightly.

'Good,' she said, much to his surprise and consternation, for he was positive that nothing would have given her greater pleasure than hearing that he was in the most excruciating agony.

'Would you like some tea?' she asked cheerfully.

'Thank you very much,' replied Daniel hesitantly. 'If you're sure it wouldn't be too much trouble.'

'No trouble whatever,' smiled nurse Bleeding.

Surely this old bat had not got a sympathetic streak, thought Daniel. The idea of her being kind to anyone terrorised him, it was a turn of events uncalled for. He liked it better, and felt much safer, when she was being beastly to him. He felt that it really was too bad of her to tease him like this.

'I will get it for you now,' she said. 'And perhaps a little toast?'

'Thank you,' stammered Daniel, thinking she was probably going to lace his tea with hemlock and spread rat poison on his toast.

'I think you could do with a shave,' she added as she left the room. 'I'll do it for you after tea.'

Well, perhaps she was going to settle for simply slitting his throat. He lay back on his pillow and dozed off.

There are four men dressed in Savile Row suits sitting at a long polished table; they are joined by a fifth who has a long grey beard and a red carnation in his buttonhole.

'My mother made me a homosexual,' mutters one of the gentlemen.

'If I gave her the wool, do you think she could make me a sweater?' asks his neighbour.

The four men rise and bow low to the venerable gentleman.

'Good morning, gentlemen,' says the old man walking towards the table and seating himself comfortably in a Chippendale chair.

'Good morning, Sir Shroud,' reply the men in unison.

'How many dead?' asks Sir Shroud.

'Millions, of starvation, in China.'

'Name one?'

'Unmarked graves.'

'We will drink to that. Bring the claret.' A waiter appears wearing white breeches and scarlet hunting jacket. He pours human blood into solid-gold goblets studded with rubies.

'Here's mud in your eye, gentlemen,' says old Sir Shroud who is full of monkey glands and joviality. He raises his goblet and sips the congealing liquid.

'Cheers!'

'Bottoms up!'

'Chin chin!'

'Good health!' shout the four Harley Street specialists wearing Savile Row suits.

'By God!' exclaims Sir Shroud. 'The blasted stuff is not ninety-eight per cent and there isn't any Worcestershire sauce in it.'

'We will speak to the steward, Sir Shroud.'

'Three bags full, Sir Shroud.'

'Has there been any further talk about my knighthood at number ten, Sir Shroud?'

'I have just laid down a pipe of lymph for your grandson, Sir Shroud.'

'Drink up, gentlemen,' exclaims Sir Shroud. 'Last to finish is a neurologist.' With that he drains his glass and strikes the table with the gavel.

'Let us bring the meeting to order.'
'Here.'
'Here.'
'Here.'
'Here.'
'Shall the minutes be said to be read?'
'Indeed.'
'Quite.'
'But of course.'
'Yeah.'
'Sir, did you study medicine on a government grant?'
'Sorry.'
'First case.'
'The patient died but the operation was a success.'
'One up for medical science, gentlemen.'
'Quite so.'
'A step in the right direction.'
'Inevitably.'
'Swinging.'
'I'll ignore that remark. Go to the bottom of the class. Next of kin.'
'Who knows?'
'Came from under a gooseberry bush.'
'Knight of the road.'
'Vivisection.'
'Signify in the usual manner, lads.'
'Eye.'
'Eye.'
'Eye.'
'I.'
'Whoops, son!'
'Motion carried.'
'Case dismissed.'
'Rather.'
'No other course of action.'
'You bet.'

'Next case.'

'Daniel Valler.'

'Gasp.'

'Gasp.'

'Gasp.'

'Errr, gasp.'

'Well done, old son. We must have you out to dinner at the house one day next week. Friday suit you?'

'Next case.'

'Call nurse Bleeding.'

'Call nurse Bleeding.'

'Call nurse Bleeding.'

'Calling nursie Bleeding.'

Nurse Bleeding enters the room, back erect, shoulders back, chest out. She is wearing full ceremonial regalia consisting of a red rubber apron, black hooded cloak with red satin lining, Wellington boots with sheep-skin lining. Her face is heavily made up with Max Factor pancake. Her eyelids are shaded with green eye shadow and sprinkled with star-dust. Her false eyelashes are thick and glossy. Her lips are thick with lustrous tangerine sherbet lipstick. She marches smartly up to the panel of eminent physicians, comes to a halt in front of the table, clicks her heels and gives the Nazi salute.

'You look devastatingly lovely, nurse Bleeding. Death suits you well.'

'I do my best, sir.'

'Splendid. We must have you out to dinner at the house one day next week. Friday suit you?'

'Champion.'

'Evidence?'

'Negligible pre-commitment emphasise provides maximum contrast originally physiological phenomena indistinguishable from equilibrium activities opposites produced counterbalance clinician organism wobbles.'

'Quite. Continue, please.'

'Imitating Aristotle's biology of organs 2A. Pythagoras for-

mula on paralogism $\frac{1}{3} + a = \text{soixanteneuf paradoxical retro-flectory diagnosis phlebotomisation.}$

'By God, nurse Bleeding, you're a treasure.'

'A pleasure to have you on the staff.'

'Yes, indeed.'

'Yes, indeed.'

Sir Shroud gets to his feet and walks sedately over to where nurse Bleeding is standing. Without uttering a word he kisses her on both cheeks in the manner of a French general.

'Congratulations, nurse Bleeding, you have won the Victoria Cross for your unprecedented devotion to the extermination of mankind.'

'Thank you, sir,' beams nurse Bleeding beside herself with glee.

'That is all. You may return to your duties. Keep up the good work.'

'Keep up the good work.'

'Keep up the good work.'

'Keep up the good work.'

'Up the workers,' shouted the proletarian. 'Poetry is the art of expressive speech!'

Daniel had only been sleeping for five minutes but it had seemed like hours. He awoke with a start as nurse Bleeding entered the room with the tea tray.

'I will accept you as my saviour, devour my Bible and go to church every Sunday,' Daniel murmured, looking up at the ceiling. Nurse Bleeding set the tray down on the bedside table and cut the toast into thin fingers. Daniel watched her out of the corner of his eye.

'Nurse Bleeding?' said Daniel.

'Yes, Mr Valler?'

'Do you think I could, er . . . Oh, it doesn't matter.'

'Come along, Mr Valler, don't be shy. What is it you want?'

'Well, there is a small pot of caviar in the drawer, do you think I could have a little of it on my toast?' he asked fearfully.

'I don't . . .'

'Never mind. Sorry I asked,' interrupted Daniel hurriedly.

'I was going to say,' continued nurse Bleeding, 'I don't see why not.'

'Don't you really?' exclaimed Daniel completely taken aback.

'I understand it is very nourishing and has a high protein content.'

'It's simply delicious on toast,' volunteered Daniel enthusiastically.

'Is there any truth in the old wives' tale about it being an aphrodisiac?' asked nurse Bleeding looking Daniel straight in the eye.

'Good Lord, nurse Bleeding, I didn't think you were interested in that sort of thing.'

'I am only interested from an academic point of view,' she replied sharply.

'To tell you the truth, I don't know if it is an aphrodisiac or not,' Daniel said meekly.

Nurse Bleeding opened the drawer and took out the small pot of caviar and placed it on the tray.

'They say that radishes and celery are aphrodisiacs,' he went on as she opened the pot and emptied the caviar on to the plate.

'Who do?'

'People.'

'What people?'

'Oh, you know, just people. Someone once told me that oysters were.'

'Were what?' Daniel knew that nurse Bleeding was messing him about but decided to play along with her.

'Aphrodisiacs.'

'Oh?'

‘Actually I can believe that oysters are,’ said Daniel.

‘Why?’

‘Because they feel as though they are, the way they slither about in your mouth. Don’t you agree?’

‘I wouldn’t know. I have never had any,’ replied nurse Bleeding completely unruffled.

‘Someone told me that if you put an oyster into a glass of straight whisky it turns to leather in thirty seconds.’

‘And does it?’

‘No.’

‘Come along now, you must have your tea before it gets cold,’ said nurse Bleeding, offering Daniel a finger of toast smothered with caviar. He opened his mouth and took a bite.

‘Delicious!’ exclaimed Daniel. ‘Absolutely delicious. You know I said that I was going to give up eating rich food until I got out of here, but I am a man of straw.’ He took another bite.

‘But you’re rich. You can afford to indulge yourself.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought that you were a conservative, nurse Bleeding,’ smiled Daniel taking a sip of tea from the cup she held to his lips.

‘I’m not really, but I’m not against people enjoying themselves when they can,’ she replied.

What on earth is she up to, wondered Daniel. Surely this dried-up old bitch did not have a soft centre? She reminded him of the hangman who upon entering the condemned cell asked the man he was about to kill how he was feeling, then smiling kindly he would offer the man his hand in friendship, but when the unsuspecting fellow took it he suddenly found his arm twisted up his back in a half-nelson and being marched to the gallows. Daniel remembered once meeting the hangman in a pub after he had hanged a woman. He had told Daniel that she was one of the best to go.

‘She slipped through my fingers like silk,’ he had said proudly.

He would have to watch nurse Bleeding very closely in the future, for she was planning a foul deed, he was sure of that.

After he had finished his tea nurse Bleeding offered to shave him but Daniel declined saying that he was going to grow a beard. She did not argue with him for she knew that to do so would have been futile. He was on his guard and it would take a lot to win his confidence.

Later that evening Nancie returned to the hospital to visit Daniel. Since she had been there once already that day, nurse Bleeding was reluctant to let her in, but after much begging and pleading she relented. Daniel was lying back on his pillow with his eyes shut when she entered the room. He was not sleeping but, though he was aware of her presence, he did not open his eyes. He knew that it was Nancie for no one smelt as exotic as she did. She came over to the bed and stroked his cheek, but still he did not open his eyes.

'Darling,' she whispered.

Daniel made no reply.

'Darling,' she said again a little louder.

'Hello,' said Daniel without opening his eyes.

'Are you awake?'

'No, I'm talking in my sleep,' he replied his eyes still tightly closed.

'Darling, I'm sorry that I was so nasty this afternoon.'

'You're stupid and bovine,' said Daniel opening one eye and then closing it again.

'I know, sweetheart. It's just that I love you so much,' she gushed.

'Well, if you are going to behave like that I wish you hated my guts.' Daniel's eyes were still closed.

'I brought you some more flowers. The nurse is putting them in water.'

'Which one?'

'I don't know what her name is but she's very ugly.'

'That must be nurse Bleeding.'

'You're joking?'

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, that can’t be her name, can it?’

‘Why not?’ Daniel opened his eyes.

‘Do you mean to say that they’ve got two nurses here, one called Blood and the other called Bleeding?’

‘Certainly,’ laughed Daniel.

‘Well, I think it is a very odd hospital.’

‘Of course it’s odd, all hospitals are odd, aren’t they?’

‘I suppose so,’ she paused and smiled down at him.

‘Darling, do you forgive me?’

‘All right, but you’re a bloody nuisance.’

‘Thank you, darling!’ she exclaimed and was about to pounce upon him.

‘Now don’t start that again,’ said Daniel sharply. ‘I have already told you I am ill. You kill me, you really do. Here I am, lying in bed looking like an Egyptian mummy, and all you can think about is sex.’

‘I want to give you the kiss of life,’ she pouted.

‘The kiss of death, you mean.’

At that moment nurse Bleeding entered the room carrying a bowl of lilies.

‘My God, this room is beginning to look like a funeral parlour. Do me a favour, nurse, and take those flowers away.’

‘What shall I do with them?’ asked nurse Bleeding.

‘I don’t care what you do with them! Just get them out of my sight, that’s all. Put them on the grave of the next person who dies in this place.’

‘Well, there’s gratitude for you, I must say . . .’ said Nancie, but did not continue, for she could tell that Daniel was beginning to lose his temper. Nurse Bleeding did not want to become involved in any domestic squabbles that Daniel might be going to have with Nancie so she left the room, discreetly taking the flowers with her. Daniel lay back on his pillow looking up at Nancie. Two small rivulets of tears ran down his cheeks.

‘Don’t cry, darling,’ soothed Nancie. ‘Everything is going to be all right.’

'Is it?' replied Daniel. 'Where is it all going to end? What is it all for? Life is Hell.'

These were not questions, they were statements. Nancie could not answer them and did not try. For a short time she sat looking at him, then getting to her feet she leaned over him and tried to kiss him.

'Don't,' said Daniel quietly, 'I don't want to be kissed.'

'All right, darling,' she replied. A tear mixed with mascara ran down her cheek and dropped onto his pillow. 'I won't come again until you send for me,' she said, and was gone before he could reply.

'Don't hold your breath!' called Daniel as the door slammed behind her.

'Do you know what, boy,' he thought as he lay back on his pillow. 'Deep down, you are an absolute swine!'

As Nancie rushed blindly along the passage, leading to she did not know where, she collided with nurse Bleeding who came out of an airing cupboard with a pile of sheets in her arms. Nancie choked an apology and was about to continue on her way.

'I'm afraid you are not going the right way, my dear,' said nurse Bleeding.

'What?'

'That is not the way out.'

'Oh,' sobbed Nancie.

'Come along, my dear. Let me show you,' smiled nurse Bleeding, putting the pile of sheets back into the airing cupboard and taking Nancie gently by the arm.

'Men are such brutes, aren't they, my dear?'

'I don't want to talk about it. I just want to get out of here.'

'Yes, of course. Come this way.'

Nancie allowed the nurse to lead her along the passage in the opposite direction from which she had been travelling.

'I see you're married,' said the nurse noticing the wedding ring on Nancie's finger. 'Is Mr Valler your husband?'

'No, just a . . .'

She suddenly broke down altogether and began to cry lustily, the tears gushed from her eyes dislodging one of her false eyelashes.

'There, there, my dear. I know, I know,' soothed nurse Bleeding, patting Nancie on the back.

'I love him so much. Why does he treat me so badly?' she whimpered.

'Callous swine!' exclaimed nurse Bleeding.

'No, he's not,' cried Nancie, 'he's the kindest, sweetest, gentlest man I have ever met in my life. He's just unhappy, that's all.'

'If I were you, my dear, I wouldn't have anything else to do with him. He will only cause you more heartache.'

'What do you know about it?' snapped Nancie drying her eyes.

'I know about men like that. They just use girls and cast them aside.'

'Please leave me alone,' pleaded Nancie.

'Women like you deserve all they get,' said nurse Bleeding becoming hostile.

'Why don't you shut your mouth, you vicious old bitch?' snarled Nancie, her sorrow turning to anger.

'There, there, my dear, shall I get you a sedative? You seem to be upset.'

'Don't you "there, there" me!' shouted Nancie and rushed off down the passage in a flood of tears. Nurse Bleeding smiled to herself as she watched her go, then went back to the airing cupboard for the clean sheets.

After five days the doctor took the bandages off Daniel's head and hands. The wounds were red and raw-looking but were healing up nicely and, though his fingers were rather stiff, he found that he was able to move them slightly. The doctor said that he was pleased with Daniel's progress and that if all went well he would be able to go home in about a week.

Scoop had visited Daniel each day bringing him some toilet requirements and his electric razor, which Daniel allowed nurse Blood to shave him with each morning or afternoon. Much to the annoyance of nurse Bleeding who, having missed the chance of cutting his throat, must surely be lying in wait for him. To add insult to injury Daniel had regulated his habits so that he was never in need of the bedpan when she was on duty. He had not heard of her contemptible attempt to turn Nancie against him, but it wouldn't have worried him much if he had, for he had more or less made up his mind to break with her for once and for all.

Much to Daniel's surprise Alice, the little blonde whom he had met at the party, came to visit him one afternoon. He did not recognise her as she came into the room, for he had been paralytic when they met and, in any case, he had a mental block against everything that had happened that night. She was wearing a white silk dress with a wide gold belt and looked absolutely ravishing. Unfortunately she had arrived whilst nurse Blood was on duty, who was somewhat aggravated by her sudden appearance on the scene, for she was beginning to consider Daniel her own private property. This little girl was going to be a threat to her, she knew that for certain. Alice bounced into the room like a ray of sunshine, breath of air, ball of fluff and trouble.

'Who are you?' smiled Daniel, somewhat startled.

'Alice.'

'This isn't Wonderland, sweetheart.'

'Don't you remember me?' she pouted.

'You look very pretty when you do that. Do it again.'

'What?'

'Pull that face.'

'Oh, don't be silly. Don't you really remember me?'

'I wish I could. Where did we meet?'

'At Lady Boyce-Liskeard's party.'

'Oh God, I remember now. We had a little chat before it all started happening?'

'That's right. I stayed right till the end. You were in a dreadful state. How do you feel now?'

'Fine,' replied Daniel and meant it.

'Good. Will they be letting you go soon?'

'One day next week, I think.'

'You won't do anything like that again, will you?'

'Please don't ask stupid questions, there's a good girl,' said Daniel wearily.

'Sorry.'

'That's all right,' Daniel winked at her. 'Where did you spring from anyway? I mean I haven't seen you around Lady Bobby's before, have I?'

'No. I only got back from Switzerland a month ago.'

'What were you doing there?'

'Finishing school.'

'Yes, of course, I might have known. Would you like some tea or something?'

'Yes, please,' said Alice giving Daniel a dazzling smile.

There was no doubt about it, she was certainly going to be trouble all right, thought Daniel.

'Do you mind pressing the bell?' asked Daniel, pointing at it with a bandaged hand.

'Yes, of course,' she replied, reaching across him and pressing the button. Daniel was intoxicated by the smell of her as she brushed past him. She smelt of new-mown hay, and after the exotic stench of Nancie's Mitzouko scent, he found it as refreshing as mountain air. The door opened and nurse Blood came in like a breeze of disinfectant.

'You rang?' she asked crossly.

'We did, indeed, nurse Blood. I wonder if you would be kind enough to pop down to the kitchen and bring us a pot of tea, please?'

'I'll see what I can do,' said nurse Blood, glowering at Alice. With that she turned on her heel and left the room, closing the door behind her.

'Nurse who?' exclaimed Alice with a laugh.

'Blood, darling. A most unusual name, don't you think?'

'It's a joke,' said Alice giving Daniel a distrustful look.

'It is not,' replied Daniel in a mock serious tone and then changing the subject went on, 'Darling, it really is nice of you to come and see me. I appreciate it more than words can express. *Light me a cigarette, will you?*'

'Certainly, my lord,' mocked Alice.

'I shall have an enormous coming-home party when I get out of this festering place,' said Daniel as she put a lighted cigarette between his lips. 'And you shall be an honoured guest.'

'Don't be pompous,' giggled Alice.

'The party will be for two, just you and I. I love you to distraction.'

'I bet you say that to all the girls,' said Alice.

'That's right, how did you know?'

'I have met your sort before, that's how,' she answered rather seriously. 'Men like you only want girls for one thing,' she went on thoughtfully.

'That is not true. I want you for many things.'

'And they all go on in bed.'

Suddenly the door opened without warning and nurse Blood came into the room, carrying a tea tray with two cups which she laid on the bedside table.

'Thank you, nurse Blood,' smiled Daniel. 'That really is most kind of you.'

'You will not be able to stay long, miss,' was all she would say by way of a reply and left the room.

'I don't think she likes me very much,' remarked Alice.

'Don't be silly, darling. She absolutely adores you,' replied Daniel. 'Pour the tea out, there's a good girl.' Alice minced around to the other side of the bed where the tea tray was and began to pour.

'Milk and sugar?' she asked.

'Please,' said Daniel. 'You know it really is kind of you to come and see me.'

'You've already said that,' replied Alice stirring his cup.
'How do you drink it?'

'You have to feed me, my angel.'

'Oh, I don't know if I could do that.'

'Of course you can,' said Daniel.

'But what if I spill it?'

'All you have to do is be careful.' Alice raised the cup to his lips and he sipped the hot tea. 'There you are, you see! As easy as pie.'

'Well, I don't know,' said Alice, 'you see I'm not very good at this kind of thing.'

'Of course you are. Let's have a drop more.' She raised the cup and Daniel took another sip.

'What about all the other things?'

'What other things?'

'You know, the other things. Do they all have to be done for you?'

'Certainly they do. You don't think I could do them myself in my state of health, do you?'

'No, but isn't it embarrassing?'

'It was at first but I'm used to it now,' smiled Daniel. 'After all, you have to remember the nurses are used to that sort of thing. What might sound revolting to you or I, is bread and butter to them.'

'I suppose so,' said Alice completely unconvinced.

'What are you going to do when you leave here?' asked Daniel.

'I hadn't thought about it, really,' she smiled and brightened up. 'There's a party over in Chelsea somewhere, but I don't really feel like going. All those men want to do all the time is get me to bed.'

'Do they manage it?' asked Daniel.

'Sometimes,' she winked, picked up her cup and drank from it. Daniel noticed that she held the cup with her little finger extended, a sign of the Fortnum and Mason's up-bringing.

'Can I have another cigarette, please?' asked Daniel.

'You'll die of cancer if you smoke so much,' replied Alice.

'That's what they say,' laughed Daniel. 'But haven't you heard I'm a terror for punishment?'

Alice lit a cigarette and put it between his lips. For a while Daniel laid back on the pillow deep in thought, the cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth.

'Penny for them?' said Alice.

'Oh, I was just thinking what a marvellous time everyone must be having talking about me while I am lying here,' replied Daniel thoughtfully.

'I shouldn't worry about them if I were you,' smiled Alice sympathetically.

'I don't really. It's just that they are such an evil lot.'

'In that case, why do you have anything to do with them?'

'I don't know really. I suppose they make me feel secure in a way.'

'What do you mean?' asked Alice somewhat confused.

'I know it may sound rather strange but it's just that, however rotten I may be, they are worse. Do you understand what I mean?'

'Not really,' replied Alice shaking her ice-blond locks from side to side.

'Never mind. Listen, will you do me a favour?'

'Depends what it is.'

'Would you go around to my place and fetch me some clean clothes?'

'Why?'

'Because the clothes I have here are smothered with blood, so I shall need a clean set for when I leave.'

'Can't you get someone else to do it for you?'

'I could, but I would like you to do it for me. Will you?'

'All right. What's the address?'

'I'll write it down for you.' Daniel looked down at his hands. 'It's funny, isn't it? We take our hands for granted,

but do not realise how important they are until we lose the use of them.'

'I suppose that applies to everything really,' replied Alice seriously.

'Have you a pencil?'

'I think so,' said Alice rummaging about in her handbag until she found a tiny leather-bound address book. 'What's the address?' she asked, pencil poised daintily.

'Sixty-nine Connaught Gardens, South Kensington,' said Daniel. 'Do you know where that is?'

'It shouldn't be difficult to find,' replied Alice scribbling the address down.

'There's no hurry,' said Daniel. 'They won't be letting me go for a few days yet.'

'All right,' smiled Alice. 'Would you like me to take your other clothes away and put them in the cleaner's?'

'No thanks. I'll get the nurse to put them in the incinerator. I never want to see them again.'

'As you like,' said Alice. 'You know I really think I ought to be going before that nurse comes back and throws me out. I am frightened of her.'

'They're all a bit frightening at first but you get used to them after a while,' said Daniel soothingly. 'I can't thank you enough for helping me out like this.' He went on touching her on the shoulder with his bandaged hand.

'Don't mention it,' smiled Alice getting to her feet. 'We women have to take care of the wounded, don't we?'

'I'll do something for you one of these days,' said Daniel earnestly as she walked towards the door.

'Good-bye,' she waved opening the door. 'I'll come again soon.'

'I say,' called Daniel.

'What is it?'

'I haven't given you the key. You won't be able to get into the place without it.' Alice came back to the bed. 'It's in the drawer,' said Daniel pointing to the locker by his bed. Alice

opened the drawer and after a short search found a bunch of keys on a gold chain.

'Alice?' murmured Daniel.

'What is it now?'

'Do you mind if I kiss you?'

'I suppose not,' she smiled and leant towards him kissing him lightly on the lips. 'Well, good-bye. I must be off,' she said and bounced out of the room as gaily as she had entered it.

When Alice had gone he lay back on his pillow and wondered who she could be. She had not told him her surname and he had forgotten to ask her it. The room now seemed dank and depressing. Alice was so full of life and innocence. Her sweetness had filled him with a warmth that he could not remember having experienced ever before.

It was at that moment that he vowed to make a fresh start. He had money and was intelligent. He could start up a small business of some sort, he thought. He wasn't really qualified for anything, but there were thousands of self-made men around who had in the beginning not been qualified for what they had chosen to do. His father had been a self-made man. Daniel had never been quite sure what he made his money out of; he had been simply that all-embracing phrase 'a business-man'. What on earth did they do? Anyway, whatever it was, Daniel vowed that he would be one.

When Scoop came to visit him the following afternoon Daniel told him of his plan to lead a more useful life. Scoop listened patiently, nodding his head up and down wisely every now and then, more to assure Daniel that he wasn't asleep than to signify any approval or disapproval. Daniel also told him about Alice and of the effect that she had had upon him. It was an unbelievable tale and Scoop stated as much after Daniel had completed it.

'It is all very plausible,' said Scoop. 'But do you really think that that is the kind of life for the likes of you?'

'I can but try,' replied Daniel mildly.

'But if you fail, you will be worse off than you are already. Not that you are all that badly off, all things considered,' said Scoop.

'But surely it is not any good just wasting your life away? After all, in spite of your wild ways you have a job, and when it comes to reporting there's no one to touch you in Fleet Street when you are on form.'

'I wouldn't have done it if I had been left a legacy, mate,' laughed Scoop.

'Well, I don't care what you say, I'm going to give it a try,' said Daniel flatly.

'That's all very fine and I would not want to talk you out of anything you had set your mind on doing. But I have known you long enough to know the kind of life that suits you best. Still, have it your way. Give it a try and see what happens,' replied Scoop.

'Thank you very much for the encouragement, Scoop. It was just what I needed,' said Daniel in a sarcastic tone of voice.

'I didn't mean to dampen your spirits, lad. It's just that this kind of talk is so unlike you.'

'I'll make it, just you wait and see.' Daniel had now become defiant so Scoop thought it best to leave well alone.

'So you'll be out in a day or two,' he said rapidly changing the subject.

'In about a week, but the doctor says that I will have to take it easy for a while.'

'Of course you will. If I were you I'd take a holiday in Cannes or somewhere and get a bit of sun.'

'Perhaps I will,' replied Daniel without enthusiasm.

'Come on, son, buck up! I didn't mean to upset you.'

'O.K.,' smiled Daniel. 'Tell me, how's Frances? I thought you were going to bring her up to see me.'

'I was, but I haven't seen her lately,' replied Scoop rather sheepishly.

'Come on now,' persuaded Daniel, 'what's happened?'

'I'm just not seeing her any more, that's all,' replied Scoop with mock disinterest.

'Why not?' asked Daniel astonished. 'Surely it isn't over what happened?'

'Well, to tell the truth, it is really.'

'But why?'

'Have you no imagination, man? Can't you see that I could not have anything further to do with her after what happened?'

'Surely you haven't developed scruples all of a sudden?'

'What do you mean, developed? I have been a man of honour all my life.' Scoop had a hurt expression on his face.

'You will be going to confession one of these days, the way you are carrying on,' laughed Daniel. 'I should like to hear what you would have to say to the priest. I bet it would be enough to make a mother superior faint!'

This made Scoop roar with laughter, and he agreed that it was a charming idea.

'In fact, I think I will do it, just for fun. I'd certainly get a piece out of it for the paper.'

'I bet they wouldn't publish it.'

'And why not?'

'Because the secrets of the confessional box are supposed to be between you and the Virgin Mary, aren't they?' asked Daniel, not in the least bit sure of his facts.

'I guess you're right,' said Scoop. 'Anyway, as far as Frances and I are concerned, it is all over. A woman must not come between a man and his friends. If she does, she is not a good woman.'

'What a terrible old puritan you are,' Daniel grinned, and dropped the matter.

When Scoop had gone, nurse Blood came into the room to give Daniel his daily bed bath. Since Alice had come to see him her attitude towards him had become somewhat formal. She had discarded her frivolous underwear and had reverted back

to the normal National Health issue. Though it was sexless, it made her feel secure and warm. Daniel was unaware of the change but then he had not known about the frilly undies either.

Nurse Blood poured hot water into a bowl and set it down on the table beside the bed. Then without a word she began to unbutton his pyjama jacket.

'Aren't you talking to me any more, nurse Blood?' asked Daniel.

'What do you mean?' she replied taking his pyjama jacket off and laying it on the chair.

'I don't know, but you seem to have gone off me lately.'

'You're not the only patient in this hospital, you know,' she said, dipping a sponge into the water, and began to wash his chest.

'You kill me, you really do. Have I ever asked for any special treatment? Go on, answer me that.'

'It's just your attitude, that's all. You think you can do or have anything or anybody you like whenever you like,' said nurse Blood crossly, rubbing him down with a coarse towel.

'My, but we're profound today, aren't we?'

'One of these days you are going to get your come-uppance and then you'll be sorry,' she replied pulling back the bed-clothes and untying his pyjama cord. She took down his trousers and began to wash his legs.

'I should have thought that what with one thing and another I had had my dose of trouble for this year. I mean to say, since I got this lot I haven't really had enough time to build up enough sins to entitle me to another lot.' She was now washing the inside of his thigh. 'God, that feels marvellous,' sighed Daniel going completely limp.

'All you ever think about is girls, girls, girls, and pleasuring yourself,' rebuked nurse Blood fully aware of the effect that she was having upon him. Daniel gasped as she applied the warm sponge to his crotch.

'Men like you spend their entire lives getting girls into

trouble,' she continued, rubbing his genitals gently with the towel.

Daniel lay back with his eyes closed trying desperately to concentrate on an imaginary brick wall with barbed wire on top of it, for to have done otherwise would have meant a raging unrequited erection, which would have pleased nurse Blood no end.

Having finished the job she dressed Daniel in silence and tucked in the blankets. He watched her as she moved briskly about the room, putting the soap in the cabinet over the basin, the towel on the rail screwed to the wall. Finally she came back to the bed and looked down at Daniel. She had a peculiar expression on her face that Daniel did not understand. He looked up at her blankly with the innocence of a child. Without saying another word nurse Blood picked up the bowl and carried it from the room. As she walked along the corridor she had a triumphant smile on her face and her eyes twinkled like stars in the heavens. She had won that round and the thought of it filled her with glowing satisfaction.

Next morning an impassioned letter arrived in the post from Nancie. Daniel looked at the envelope, recognised the handwriting and was in two minds whether to open it or not.

'Well, aren't you going to open it?' asked nurse Bleeding making up his mind for him.

'Would you do it for me, please?' asked Daniel. Nurse Bleeding produced a scalpel from her apron pocket and slit open the envelope, took out the letter and laid it on the bed in front of him. 'Thank you, nurse Bleeding. That is very kind of you,' said Daniel.

She hesitated as though waiting for him to read her the letter. But as he showed no sign of doing so she left the room. He looked down at the mauve sheet of paper covered with feminine handwriting:

Dearest darling Angel,

I miss you so much I am dying of it. If I thought you

didn't love me I would let the whole thing drop. But I don't believe it. Do I have to lie down and let you walk all over me? If it would help, I would in fact do just that. Please let me come and see you. Or don't you believe in love any more? My situation doesn't matter. I don't know why it doesn't, I only know that I love you and that without you I can't be bothered to live.

I am alone during the weekend. Can I come on Saturday? If I don't hear from you I will understand that it is really over.

NANCIE

P.S. Have you read *Histoire d'O* yet?

Wouldn't it be fantastic if people were as sweet as their letters, thought Daniel, lying back on the pillows. The letter slipped off the bed and floated to the ground where it remained neglected and forgotten.

Later in the day Alice arrived with a suitcase containing Daniel's clothes. If anything, she looked even more beautiful than she had done before. She laid the case beside the bed and smiled down at Daniel.

'Do you know what?' smiled Daniel.

'What?' she asked averting her eyes from the steaming look he was giving her.

'You are absolutely ravishing.'

'Thank you, sir, she said.'

'I think I'm in love with you,' said Daniel quietly. 'And for goodness' sake don't say I bet that's what you say to all the girls.'

'Well, you do, don't you?'

'Sometimes,' sighed Daniel inspecting her closely from top to toe, and mentally stripping her naked. She was wearing a chic two-piece suit in white and pink candy stripes.

'What are all those photographs in your bedroom?' she asked, jolting him back to reality.

'What about them?'

'Why have you got them up there? I think you must be very kinky.'

'Who isn't?'

'Me.'

'Oh yes you are. You've got a plastic raincoat, haven't you?'

'Yes I have, but I don't see what that has got to do with it.'

'Everyone has got a thing about skin. Most of us like shiny materials, they bring out our animal instincts. But don't think that nuns don't get sexual satisfaction from doing penance and wearing sackcloth, because they do. I like satin nighties, slips and panties. They appeal to the dirty old man part of my mind. Would you like some tea? Ring the bell for the nurse.'

'But I was always taught that we should control our baser instincts,' replied Alice pressing the bell.

'It is only convention. To be puritanical is as evil as being evil. Society dictates that we should only get sexual pleasure in a conventional manner. If we deviate from the written and unwritten laws we are social outcasts. And in some cases you can find yourself in prison. Do you know that in some American states a wife is within her legal rights to shoot her husband if he buggers her?'

Alice was saved from having to think up a scintillating reply to this elevated question by the arrival of nurse Bleeding who wanted to know why the bell had been rung. Daniel asked her kindly if she would mind bringing some tea. She departed making the same complaint as usual, about the kitchen staff having gone off duty, but grudgingly saying that she would see what she could do.

'It is just that everyone panders either to convention or to the law,' continued Daniel as the nurse left the room. 'Just about everything that is most satisfying, sexual or otherwise, is against the laws, many of which are unwritten. Surely the most exciting experience a man can have is to make love to a girl within half an hour of meeting her for the first time. And

the most delicious of all so-called forbidden fruits is someone else's wife,' he ended.

'It's a good job we don't all live like that,' remarked Alice.

'On the contrary, it's a bad job,' replied Daniel with conviction.

'Well, I wouldn't want to live in a world like that. I want the man I love to be faithful to me for ever.'

'Sex is not love,' laughed Daniel. 'Just because a man goes to bed with another man's wife, it doesn't necessarily mean that she is being unfaithful to her husband or vice versa. It simply means that they have been to bed with each other, that's all.'

'I don't agree with you and that's all there is to it. Do you mind if we drop the subject?' said Alice getting up from the bed where she had been sitting and walking over to the window.

'All right. We won't talk about it any more,' replied Daniel. 'May I have a cigarette, please?' Alice lit a cigarette, brought it over to him and placed it between his lips. Their eyes met. Daniel smiled at her and winked, then the door opened and nurse Bleeding appeared with the tea tray.

'Do you know what I think?' said Alice after the nurse had gone.

'What?' asked Daniel.

'I think you're a terrible phoney.'

'Is that so? Why?'

'I think you act, talk and think the way you do because it's convenient.'

'Do you now?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Well, don't just stand there. Pour the tea out, there's a good girl,' said Daniel in a rather patronising tone of voice.

'Do it yourself.'

'Look, ma, no hands,' replied Daniel, holding up his bandaged paws.

Alice relented and began to pour the tea out.

'If I was you, I would try starting all over again and make something of your life,' she said stirring the cups.

'And who, may I ask, made you my Dutch uncle?'

'Don't lose your temper, I'm only trying to help.'

'As a matter of fact,' interrupted Daniel, 'I have been thinking things over and have decided that it is about time I made myself useful.'

'Have you?' she asked in surprise.

'Yes, I have. And you don't have to look so amazed. Anyone would have thought that you had known me all my life to hear you talk.'

'I know more about you than you may think,' said Alice lifting the cup to his lips.

'Is that so?' said Daniel sipping the tea.

'I've known hundreds of men like you.'

'Well, good for you,' he replied sarcastically.

'Well, perhaps not hundreds, but quite a few.'

'And I suppose you have managed to change them all into nice little members of society?'

'I didn't say that.'

'That's the trouble with the world. Everyone wants to interfere with other people. I make my own decisions and I don't like meddlers!'

'All right, all right,' soothed Alice. 'You don't have to lose your temper.'

'I'm not losing my temper, I'm simply telling you, that's all.'

'What day are you coming out of here?' asked Alice.

'I don't know exactly. Monday, I think. They don't tell you much in here. They're too full of their own self-importance for that. They think that by keeping you in the dark they have some kind of power over you. They only succeed in infuriating me.'

'Is there anything else I can do for you?' asked Alice.

'As a matter of fact there is. You could ring up Scoop O'Toole and ask him to go around to my garage, get the car

out and come and meet me. I think he's away on a story for a few days so I won't be seeing him. But he rings his office every day for messages.'

'All right,' smiled Alice laying his empty cup down on the tray.

'Will you come with him?'

'Who?'

'Scoop. When he comes to take me away from this rat-trap?'

'All right,' she smiled sweetly.

'There's a good girl!'

'I suppose I really ought to be going now.' There was genuine regret in her voice, which touched Daniel's heart.

'Thank you very much for coming to see me,' he said quietly. 'Sorry I'm such a monster.'

'You're not a monster, you just like to think you are,' she replied bending over and kissing him lightly on the lips.

'Don't let's start that again,' he said against her mouth and wickedly flicked his tongue between her lips with the speed of a lizard. She pressed her lips hard against his, cupping his face in her hands.

'I'll rape you in a minute,' laughed Daniel as she straightened up. 'I suppose you realise that I have been celibate since I have been in here?'

'What's that? A new position?' asked Alice taking her powder compact from her handbag.

'That's right. It's called the missionary position.'

'Well I never, you live and learn. I must be off. I'll ring Scoop and see you tomorrow. That is, unless you don't want to see me?'

'I am madly in love with you and will die a slow and painful death if you don't come,' replied Daniel with such sincerity that they both burst out laughing. With a wave of her tiny white gloves she left the room.

A couple of days later the doctor put a lighter dressing on Daniel's hands, bandaging each finger individually instead of

all together thus giving him a little more freedom of movement. Having lain on his back for just over two weeks Daniel was restless and eager to get up. The doctor forestalled the impending question by informing him that he could get up that afternoon and sit in a chair by the window; he could also take a little exercise around the room but must take it easy to begin with. After lunch nurse Blood helped Daniel on with his dressing-gown and supported him as he took his first unsteady steps across the room. After four shuffled paces his knees buckled under him and he almost fell to the ground.

'Upsadaisy!' said nurse Blood clutching him around the waist and guiding him to the chair. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

'There we are,' smiled nurse Blood, 'but we mustn't stay up too long to begin with. Otherwise we might have a relapse.'

'Quite,' replied Daniel giving nurse Blood a wan smile.

He watched the traffic buzzing about in the street like hornets and it occurred to him that it was just as well that pedestrians did not behave in the same way as motorists. The idea conjured up an amusing picture in his mind. Pedestrians barging each other off the pavement, shouting abuse at each other and viciously smashing into one another.

Though Daniel was still rather weak he was on the mend. The wounds were healing satisfactorily. He felt that it could not be long before he was completely better. He also made a mental vow that he would never do such a stupid thing to himself again.

Though he had made several resolutions about the future and was anxious to leave the hospital, he had many qualms when he awoke on the morning of his release. For the routine of hospital life had given him a certain security. He knew that he would miss it when he found himself compelled to fend for himself. He did not leave on the Monday as anticipated, because the doctor thought it advisable for him to remain a few days longer in order to X-ray the finger with the severed tendon. The doctor then informed him that he could go home

on the Thursday morning, by which time he had been in the hospital for two weeks and one day.

Alice and Scoop arrived at eleven o'clock to collect him. Nurse Bleeding had washed and dressed him before their arrival so that when they knocked on his door he was sitting on the edge of his unmade bed.

'You look fine,' exclaimed Scoop who had not been to visit him for a week, due to a bout of drinking that had seized hold of him and was still not loosening its grip.

'I feel all right,' replied Daniel rather gloomily.

'Cheer up,' smiled Alice kissing him on the cheek. 'I would have thought you would be pleased to be getting out of this place.'

'I am,' replied Daniel without conviction.

'Come along then.' Scoop was getting impatient for his next glass of Scotch. 'I thought it might be nice if we all had lunch together at Le Carrefour. We haven't been there for ages.'

'All right, keep your hair on. I just want to say good-bye to nurse Bleeding.'

'What for?' exclaimed Scoop in astonishment.

'Oh, she's not such a bad old stick really,' replied Daniel. 'Not once you get to know her.'

In the corridor they ran into nurse Bleeding who was walking alongside an operating trolley *en route* for the theatre, where its passenger would have his varicose veins pulled out like lengths of spaghetti.

'Good-bye, nurse Bleeding,' said Daniel with a beaming smile. 'And thank you for everything you have done for me.'

Nurse Bleeding stared at him, wondering whether he was serious or not. 'Good-bye,' she replied at last. 'And don't forget that you are to come to Out Patients once a week for the next month, will you, Mr Valler?'

'No, nurse, I won't forget,' smiled Daniel. 'I just wanted you to know how much I appreciate everything you have done for me.'

Daniel's new-found civility disgusted Scoop who walked away from the group grumbling to himself.

Nurse Bleeding had begun by hating Daniel, she had over the past weeks begun to change her mind, though she couldn't have told anyone why. She smiled at Daniel and Alice and continued on her way to the operating theatre. Daniel hoped that the patient would not become a corpse within the hour, for he felt that now that nurse Bleeding had made a little progress along the narrow path of humanitarian thought, it would be a crying shame if her sadistic tendencies were re-awakened by the blood dripping from the autopsy slab in the mortuary.

As they came out of the lift Daniel saw a rather pretty young woman coming towards him, wearing a light summer frock and high-heeled shoes. Daniel thought her face familiar but for a few seconds was not able to put a name to it. Then, suddenly, it dawned on him who it was.

'Nurse Blood,' he called, going forward to meet her.

'Good morning, Mr Valler,' she smiled, nodding but not speaking to Alice and Scoop. Daniel, even though he realised she had taken special pains, thought it quite amazing how different she looked in civilian clothes.

'You look absolutely lovely,' he said as she came closer to him.

'Thank you,' replied nurse Blood, casting her eyes to the ground demurely.

'I would have hardly recognised you,' he continued awkwardly. He knew that Alice was watching him closely but gave a good impression of being unaware of it. 'I was afraid that I wasn't going to see you to say good-bye.'

'Come along,' interrupted Alice rather sharply. 'We'll lose our table if we don't hurry.'

'I just wanted to thank you for being so kind to me,' continued Daniel ignoring Alice's remark. 'I'm sure I wouldn't have got better so quickly if it hadn't been for you.'

'I'm sure you would have,' replied nurse Blood modestly.

'That's not true. You are a nurse in a million.'

'I just do my job.'

'Well, I think you're wonderful,' smiled Daniel, taking one of her hands in both of his. 'I must take you out to dinner one night just to show my appreciation.'

'It doesn't matter, really,' she murmured. 'You don't have to do that, honestly you don't.'

'Don't mind me,' said Alice crossly.

'Good-bye, Mr Valler, and do take good care of yourself.'

'I'll do my best,' smiled Daniel squeezing her hand.

Without another word nurse Blood walked away in the direction of the lift. Daniel watched her go and then followed the others out of the glass doors into the street. In the lift nurse Blood burst into tears much to the amazement of a negro orderly who was sharing the ride with her.

Scoop had brought Daniel's E-type two-seater and parked it outside the hospital in a space reserved for ambulances. As they walked towards the car an enraged ambulance driver began to hurl abuse at them. Scoop informed him haughtily that he was a member of the press and that he had better mind his manners.

'I don't care who you are, mate!' shouted the furious proletarian. 'You can't park there.'

'Get fucked,' replied Scoop flatly, opening the door of the car.

'We'll see about that,' said the ambulance driver looking up and down the street for a policeman.

'Come on, Scoop, let's go,' pleaded Daniel. 'I haven't been out of the hospital for five minutes and already it's started.'

'What's started?' asked Alice.

'Trouble,' replied Daniel getting into the car. Reluctantly Scoop got into the driver's seat and Alice crammed herself between them as best she could. Scoop started up the engine and roared off leaving the enraged ambulance driver standing on the kerb shaking his fist at them.

Chapter Six

The head waiter at Le Carrefour greeted Daniel warmly and said that he was extremely sorry to hear that he had not been well.

'Thank you,' replied Daniel. 'That's very kind of you.'

'Don't mention it, sir. May I get you a drink?'

'Large Scotch for me,' said Scoop, who had not yet been asked.

'Certainly, sir. And for madam?'

'Gin and orange, please,' replied Alice.

'I think I'll just have some Vichy water,' said Daniel apologetically. 'I'm a bit out of training for the hard stuff,' he went on by way of explanation, noticing that the head waiter looked rather shocked.

'Certainly, sir.'

Daniel surveyed the room. There were the usual overdressed theatricals, advertising executives and a few millionaires. Not having seen them for a while he was astonished at how degenerate they all looked. He knew that they had always looked the same since time immemorial. It was simply that he had not really looked at them before. He had a sudden urge to get up and leave the place. Without a word he got to his feet and rushed out of the bar into the street. Alice and Scoop watched him go with their mouths hanging open.

'What's up with him?' inquired Scoop without much interest.

'I don't know,' replied Alice, 'I'll go and find out. Perhaps he doesn't feel well.'

She stood up and walked to the door. She could see Daniel on the other side of the glass door asking the commissionaire to

get him a taxi. Alice hurried out into the street and rushed up to where Daniel was standing.

'Darling, what's the matter?'

'I just don't feel like eating all that rich food,' lied Daniel.

'But it's your home-coming party. Please don't go,' she begged.

'I'll only spoil everything if I stay,' replied Daniel as a cab drew up at the kerb.

'You don't have to have anything rich. You can just have an omelette or something.'

Alice was by this time very upset, for she felt that if she let him escape now she would never see him again. After much persuasion on the part of Alice and a little impatience on the part of the cab driver, Daniel decided that he would stay for lunch after all. As they re-entered the restaurant Scoop was on his third large Scotch and was beginning to show signs of drunkenness.

'Now where have you been?' he asked as Daniel sat down.

'Just outside. Let's forget it, shall we?'

'Forget what?' asked Scoop, who had no idea that anything had transpired which he should forget.

'Your table is ready, Mr Valler,' said the head waiter coming over to where they were sitting, thus saving Daniel from having to give any further explanation. Scoop finished his drink in one great gulp and then, with the head waiter taking the lead, they entered the dining-room and were shown to a corner table and given the menu.

'I'll have quack-quack, mashed spuds and peas,' said Scoop without looking at the menu.

'Thank you, sir,' replied the waiter, completely unruffled. Alice ordered an exotic dish with many ingredients, the main one of which was lobster. Daniel ordered a plain omelette as advised. When the wine waiter came over to the table Daniel asked for a bottle of rosé, saying that he would only have half a glass of it. Though his hands were still bandaged he was able

to use them in a rather clumsy fashion. As he was having only the omelette there was not a great deal of effort involved.

They ate in silence for a while until suddenly a beautiful young girl appeared in the doorway. She had long black hair, almond eyes and a long slim figure. She was in the company of a short fat Jew with a balding head.

'Who on earth is that?' asked Daniel, as he watched the girl sail across the room to a table at the far end.

'Her name's Gloria Duval. She's an American film star over here to make a film for Sol Glickman,' replied Scoop with his mouth full of duck.

'My, isn't she stunning?' said Daniel unable to take his eyes off her.

'She's not bad,' remarked Alice jealously. 'But I've seen better.'

'Don't you remember she had a baby last year? It was all over the papers,' asked Scoop.

'Really,' replied Daniel. 'Who's the father?'

'No one knows,' laughed Scoop. 'It would take a computer to find out.'

'Why?' asked Daniel, his interest beginning to quicken.

'She drops her drawers something rotten,' said Scoop emptying his wine-glass down his throat.

Alice was delighted to hear that this ravishing lady was by no means a paragon of virtue. A month before Daniel would have been excited by the idea of her being a slut and would have done everything in his power to meet her and get her to bed.

'She's had more meat injections than you've had hot dinners,' continued Scoop with relish.

'Shut up!' exclaimed Daniel so loudly that the customers at the next table looked in their direction nervously.

'What on earth is the matter with you? You've been acting peculiar ever since we left the hospital.'

'I just wish you wouldn't enjoy other people's destruction so much,' said Daniel calming down somewhat.

'Pardon me, I'm sure,' mocked Scoop.

'All right, let's drop it, shall we?'

The luncheon party was not a success. Daniel was unamused by Scoop's drunkenness and wanted to get away from him as soon as possible. Alice knew that there was something eating Daniel but thought it better to keep quiet about it. When they had finished their meal Scoop said that he wanted some brandy. Daniel said that he did not want any and asked to be excused.

'Where are you going?' asked Alice.

'I don't know,' he replied. 'I just want to get out of here, that's all.'

'Please let me come with you,' pleaded Alice.

'You can come if you like'

'Where'ya going?' asked Scoop.

'Home,' said Daniel.

'What's the matter?' Scoop was obviously puzzled.

'I just don't feel like hanging about in here all the afternoon,' said Daniel.

'You won't be hanging about all the afternoon. They close at three,' slurred Scoop.

'Well, I'm going anyway,' replied Daniel and without another word walked across the room towards the door with Alice trailing behind him.

Out in the street the commissionaire hailed a taxi for Daniel and Alice got in it with him. As the cab lurched through the traffic, stopping at the red lights, crawling behind buses and every now and then gathering speed when there was an empty stretch of road, Daniel thought about the future. Was he really going to make something of it? Could he make the break with the past? There was not much in his favour. True he was young and had enough money not to worry about where the next meal was coming from, but, he realised, he was a man of straw. People often say that they are going to give up doing whatever it is they are doing when something dreadful happens to them, but how many of them succeed? More often

than not they have completely forgotten their new resolutions as soon as the crisis has passed.

'Penny for them,' said Alice looking up at him.

'Oh, I was just thinking,' smiled Daniel.

'What about?'

'Life.'

'Oh?'

'Yes.'

'What about it?' asked Alice enthusiastically, not wanting the conversation to peter out.

'It's hard, that's all,' remarked Daniel, glancing out of the window at the shoppers ducking in and out of Harrods like rabbits in a warren. At last the cab stopped outside Daniel's house and they got out.

'Would you mind paying him?' asked Daniel. 'I can't get my hands in my pockets.'

'All right,' laughed Alice opening her purse and taking a ten-shilling note out of it, which she handed to the driver telling him to keep the change.

Without Daniel's knowledge Alice had cleaned his flat from top to bottom. There was not a speck of dust to be seen anywhere. 'I've just remembered something,' said Alice as they entered the front door.

'What's that?' asked Daniel.

'What about your car?'

'Don't worry about it,' laughed Daniel. 'Scoop will take care of it. You never know, he might wrap it round a lamp post and put himself in hospital. Then we can go and visit him and make *his* life a misery.'

Daniel walked into the bedroom and was shocked to see that all the photographs had been taken down and replaced with a few modern prints. He also noticed that his beloved Tibetan idol was missing.

'The house has been burgled!' he exclaimed, rushing from the room.

'No, it hasn't,' giggled Alice.

'Well, where have all the pictures gone?' he went on.

'I took them down,' she smiled leading him back into the room and gently pushing him onto the bed.

'But what did you take them down for?' asked Daniel with a puzzled expression on his face.

'You won't need them any more now that you have me,' she replied kissing him lightly on the lips.

'Who says I won't?' spluttered Daniel. 'And who says that I have you?'

'I do, darling,' she replied getting up from the bed and standing in front of him. 'Don't you want me?' she asked.

'I didn't say that I didn't but . . .' he tailed off as she began to unbutton her dress. The buttons ran down the front from breast to hem. He watched her in silence as she dexterously undid each one and then took the dress off, which she neatly folded and laid over the back of a chair. She then drew the curtains, kicked off her shoes and came back to the bed. Daniel had always thought her ravishing, but now in the half-light of the room he thought her the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life. He sent up a silent prayer that she would not be a disappointment like so many of the others before.

Daniel half sat up and began to struggle with his jacket.

'Relax, darling,' she whispered. 'I'll do that.'

Slowly and gently she began to undress him. He felt completely helpless, like a little boy lost, as he lay there on his back, prick erect and his bandaged hands lying limply at his side. He was absolutely in her power and she knew it. She wriggled out of the rest of her clothes and lay down next to him her eyes smouldering and her moist lips slightly apart. The first touch of her naked flesh against his sent a shiver through him that made his skin twitch like a horse's flanks when a fly settles on it. Their lips met in a ravenous kiss that left them both gasping. Then slowly and softly she began to smother his chest with moist kisses, then his stomach, working her way down to his thighs at an agonisingly slow speed. Daniel was no stranger to this kind

of treatment, but he could not remember it ever being done with such finesse or thoroughness. There was not a crease in his skin that her tongue did not explore. He had to use all of his powers of concentration to prevent his climax coming before she was ready. Daniel wondered where this hot and cold running girl-child had received her tuition. If degrees could be taken in fellatio she would have passed with flying colours. With one lithe movement of her supple body she straddled him and guided his pulsating member into the steaming womb. As soon as her boiling flesh enveloped him, he could control his orgasm no longer. It left him in four excruciating spurts like shots from a repeating rifle.

'Yes, yes, yes,' she moaned, jerking backwards in a frenzied attempt to reach her climax with him. 'Love me, darling, love me,' she gasped pressing down on his rapidly shrinking cock.

Suddenly she came with a shriek of joy and fell onto his chest sobbing and muttering incoherent endearments. For a long time she lay on top of him holding him in a vice-like grip, her sharp fingernails biting into his flesh. When at last she rolled off, she nestled close to his sweating body with her nose pressed into his reeking armpit.

'Darling, you smell absolutely marvellous,' she whispered licking the lobe of his ear softly.

Daniel turned his head in her direction and lightly kissed her eyelids.

'Fuck these bandages,' he said holding his hands in the air. 'Do you realise that I haven't touched you yet? God, how I long to run my fingers through your hair.'

'Don't worry, darling. We have lots and lots of time. Years and years and years.'

She kissed him passionately on the lips forcing her tongue between his teeth.

'Darling, I want you again,' she said taking his damp member between two fingers.

'Take it easy, angel,' smiled Daniel. 'Don't forget I've only just come out of hospital.'

'Do you feel smug now that you have made me so happy?' she asked sadly.

'Of course not,' replied Daniel, rather taken aback. 'What a thing to say.'

'Please be nice to me,' she sighed.

In those five words was a plea that Daniel could not find it in his heart to refuse. It was the cry of a girl who had been used by men without gentleness, without kindness, without love. They had used her, hurt her and cast her aside. Daniel was filled with the milk of human kindness. He was determined that she should not be harmed ever again. She needed him. This was basically all he had ever wanted, someone who depended on him.

'Don't worry, darling,' he whispered kissing her tousled hair. 'I will take care of you always.'

She snuggled closer to him, like a kitten that had just finished a saucer of cream.

'I'll be back in a minute,' said Daniel raising himself onto his elbows.

'Where are you going?' she pouted.

'Only to have a piss,' laughed Daniel.

'I'll miss you like mad.'

Daniel swung his feet onto the floor, bounced off the bed and went to the bathroom. When he returned she had got between the sheets and was lying on her back smoking a cigarette.

'Would you like a bath?' asked Daniel.

'And wash your delicious smell away?' she smiled. 'I am never going to wash again. I want to smell of you for ever.'

'Do you know what?' he asked.

'What, my angel?'

'You are the most wonderful girl I have ever met in my life.'

'Come here, you gorgeous beast, I want to eat you.'

'So you shall,' laughed Daniel. 'So you shall.'

They spent the whole of the afternoon and early evening in

bed making passionate love and smoking cigarettes. The phone rang several times but they ignored it, and Daniel made a mental note about getting the telephone company to change his number as soon as possible. At six in the evening the door bell rang several times, each time more urgent than the last but nothing would induce them to answer the door.

At eight thirty they got dressed and crept out into the street to have dinner at a little restaurant that was off the beaten track and was not frequented by anyone that Daniel knew. As they came out of the front door they noticed that Daniel's car had been parked outside. It therefore must have been Scoop who had been ringing the door bell so urgently.

'I'm surprised that he did not smash it up,' remarked Alice.

'He's a better driver when he's pissed than he is when he is sober.'

At the restaurant they sat at a table in the darkest corner. Daniel ordered two fillet steaks and a bottle of red wine. Because of his damaged hands he was unable to cut his steak so Alice did it for him. They did not talk very much during the meal. Instead, they sat with their legs entwined under the table, their eyes alight with the first blaze of requited love.

'Darling,' smiled Daniel looking at her over the top of his wine-glass, 'shall we run away together in the morning?'

'Yes, please,' laughed Alice.

'We could go to Spain or the South of France or somewhere,' continued Daniel excitedly.

'Darling, I do love you,' murmured Alice.

'We'll get tickets the first thing in the morning and be gone before anyone misses us,' laughed Daniel.

'It will be marvellous to get some sun on my body,' smiled Alice. 'I look ever so sexy with a suntan.'

'You don't need a suntan to get me to bed.'

'Will you always feel like that about me?'

'Always and always.'

'You won't get tired of me, will you?'

'Never.'

Daniel suddenly became thoughtful. Surely she was not starting already? She was so marvellous, surely she was not going to be like the rest? Needing to be told how much he loved them every minute of the day and night, demanding this and demanding that?

'I will love you for ever and ever,' he continued dismissing the thoughts from his mind. This time it is going to work, he told himself. Nothing and no one was going to spoil it. He would work hard at this relationship. He would not just sit back and let the whole thing become one-sided, as he had done so many times before. He would do anything she asked without question. He would love her and make her feel wanted every minute. There would be no rows or bickering. He would not be unfaithful to her; he would give her anything she desired.

'What are you thinking about, my angel?' she asked pouting slightly.

'You,' he replied, squeezing one of her legs between both of his.

'I thought I had lost you for a minute,' she continued.

'You will never lose me as long as you live,' smiled Daniel.

'Let's get the bill and go, shall we?'

'Darling, I want to tell you something,' said Alice earnestly.

'What is it, my sweet?' asked Daniel.

'I just want you to know that it has never been like this with anyone else.'

'I should think not, either,' laughed Daniel.

'Big head,' she smiled.

'You're beautiful. Let's pay the bill and get to bed.'

'Greedy.'

'I love you.'

'And I love you, too.'

'You're very handsome.'

'I know.'

'Big head.'

'Fat bum.'

'I have not got a fat bum.'

'Yes, you have. Waiter?'

The waiter came over to the table and Daniel asked for the bill, paid it and they left the restaurant.

The next morning Daniel woke up very early, for he had become accustomed to waking up at the crack of dawn whilst in hospital. It took him a few seconds to realise where he was, then rolling over onto his side he put his arms around Alice and pulled her close to him. She stirred in her sleep and muttered something that Daniel did not catch. She then turned her back on him. Daniel kissed her back lightly and slipped out of bed and went into the bathroom. The bandages on his hands had become loose during the night so he decided to take them off and see how the cuts were coming along. With difficulty he got the bandages off and inspected the wounds. They were now completely dry and he found that, though his fingers were still stiff, he was able to move them quite freely.

He turned the bath taps on, and went into the kitchen and put the kettle on for tea. As he passed the bedroom he glanced in the door and saw that Alice was fast asleep. He wondered why it was that girls always seemed to sleep far more than men. The younger girls were, the longer they seemed to stay in bed; and the older the men got, the earlier they got up. He then went back to the bathroom, turned the taps off and went to the kitchen to make the tea. Having taken a cup into the bedroom for Alice, he soaked himself for twenty minutes, shaved and went back into the bedroom to get dressed. Alice was still sleeping. He took a suit from the wardrobe and a shirt from the chest of drawers and went into the sitting-room to dress so that he would not disturb her.

Having dressed and tied his tie with some difficulty, he rumaged in a drawer in the hall where he remembered that he had put a pair of kid gloves the winter before. When he found them he put them on. They fitted comfortably over the cuts and he felt that they would do just as well as the bandages, and

were anyway not so unsightly. He then looked in on Alice, who was still sleeping and had not drunk her tea.

'Darling,' whispered Daniel sitting on the edge of the bed and stroking her hair.

She stirred slightly and opened her eyes.

'I am just going down to the bank to get some money and fix up the tickets,' he continued.

'Don't be long, sweetheart,' she replied with a yawn. 'Can I have a bath?'

'Yes, of course. I think you'll find everything you need.' Daniel kissed her lightly on the forehead.

'I shouldn't be very long,' he said as he left the room. He was just about to open the front door when suddenly the phone rang. He went into the sitting-room and picked up the receiver.

'Hello!' he said into the mouthpiece.

'Hello, darling. Is that you?' asked a female voice on the other end of the line.

'Who's that?'

'Me, darling.'

'Who?'

'Nancie, darling. Don't you recognise my voice?'

'What do you want?'

'I just wondered if you were all right, that's all.'

'I'm fine,' replied Daniel noncommittally.

'What's the matter, darling? Aren't you pleased to hear from me?'

'It's just that I'm in a hurry. I have to go out,' lied Daniel.

'Can we have lunch?'

'Not today.'

'Why not?'

'Because I've got far too much to do.'

'You're with that tart, aren't you?'

'Listen, if you talk like that I'll ring off,' said Daniel angrily.

'You don't want me any more, do you?' she was beginning to snivel.

'Oh, very moving, I must say,' Daniel replied.

'I'll always love you, no matter what you do. I just can't help it, I will wait for you, no matter how long it is,' she was now crying at full throttle.

'Don't hold your breath,' said Daniel and put down the receiver.

At the bank Daniel asked to see the manager, and after a short wait was shown into his office.

'Good morning, Mr Valler. I hope you are well?' asked the manager showing him to a chair.

'I am very well thank you, Mr Zurowski. I've just had a bit of an accident with my hands, that's all, and will not be able to sign cheques for a while . . .'

'I will, of course, be of any assistance I can,' interrupted Mr Zurowski.

'That really is most kind of you,' continued Daniel. 'As a matter of fact there is something you can do for me. I am flying to the South of France this afternoon and will need a supply of money for expenses.'

'But of course,' gushed Mr Zurowski, 'I should be delighted to assist you.'

'I wonder if you would also be kind enough to ring up a travel agency and book two seats for me for the afternoon flight?'

'Certainly, Mr Valler. It would be a pleasure.'

'Fine,' smiled Daniel and stood up. 'I'll call back at lunch time for the money and tickets.'

'That will be fine, Mr Valler,' laughed Mr Zurowski, ushering him to the door. 'Everything will be arranged by then.'

Actually, although the bank manager was always polite and helpful to Daniel, he in point of fact hated his guts. This was mainly because almost all the cheques that went through his account were in payment for luxury items such as expensive meals at the Caprice or Mirabelle and night clubs such as the Stork Room and the Four Hundred. His bank statements were the autobiography of a spendthrift.

Daniel got home from the bank to find Alice up and dressed in the kitchen making a pot of coffee.

'Hello, darling,' he said, going up behind her and putting his arms about her waist and pressing his thighs against her buttocks. 'I've been to the bank and they'll have the tickets and money by lunch time.'

'I'll have to go round to my place and pack some things,' she replied, squirming in his arms.

'Sexy bitch,' laughed Daniel pressing his lips against the nape of her neck.

'Not now, darling,' said Alice as he pulled her dress up and fumbled with her panties.

'But I want you,' begged Daniel.

'You're greedy, that's what you are,' teased Alice pulling away from him and running into the bedroom. Daniel followed her in hot pursuit.

'I must go home,' exclaimed Alice as he tossed her onto the bed. 'I've got to pack,' she pleaded.

'Do it later,' said Daniel diving on top of her.

'Wait a minute,' she replied wriggling out of his clutches. 'You'll crease my dress.' She took off her dress and lay down beside him and unzipped his fly.

'I want you every minute,' gasped Daniel rolling on top of her.

Alice and Daniel arrived at the Hotel Negresco in Nice at eight o'clock in the evening and after signing in were shown to a suite with a balcony overlooking the sea.

'Darling, isn't this wonderful?' said Alice throwing open the french windows and going out onto the balcony.

Daniel followed her out onto the balcony and took her in his arms.

'Anywhere would be marvellous, so long as you were there,' he replied kissing her softly on the lips. 'Shall I order some dinner? Then we can go out to a night club,' he asked, going

back into the room and picking up the phone. 'Is there anything you would like?'

'I don't know, some oysters or something might be nice,' replied Alice.

Daniel ordered two dozen oysters and a bottle of Piper-Heidsiek champagne and put the receiver down.

Daniel could not remember a time when he had been more in love than he was at this precise moment. Alice was the most beautiful girl he had ever met. She had blotted out the memory of the multitude of lovers who had graced his bed for so long. Surely she would not bore him to the verge of self-destruction as so many of the others had done before her. Alice came into the room from the balcony and sat down on the couch.

'Darling,' she smiled, 'it is so beautiful here, can we stay for ever?' Daniel sat down beside her and took her in his arms.

'We will stay for as long as you like,' he replied seriously and kissed her on the tip of her nose.

The waiter brought in the champagne and oysters. After he had left Alice said, laughing,

'Darling, I simply adore oysters. They feel exactly like kisses.'

Daniel smiled and poured out the champagne.

'What shall we drink to?' asked Alice raising her glass.

'A new life?' suggested Daniel.

'That's a bit dull,' pouted Alice. 'What about sex?'

'You have a one-track mind.'

'And you haven't, I suppose?'

'I do think of other things now and then.'

'Darling, don't be such a drag.'

'To sex then,' laughed Daniel clinking his glass against hers. They raised their glasses to their lips.

'You do love me, don't you?' she asked putting her glass down on the table.

'What a question,' he replied.

'Well, you do, don't you?' she persisted.

‘Madly. Now eat your oysters.’

Alice devoured the oysters in indescribable sexual relish. They slid down her gullet as smoothly as a satin slip through the fingers of a transvestite. She was without doubt the most licentious creature he had ever come across. Could he reform her? He laughed to himself. How could he reform anyone? But he remained determined to keep his resolution to turn over a new leaf.

After dinner they went to a night club and got rather drunk.

The beach was already crowded with tourists when Daniel arrived—he had left Alice still asleep. The greater number of them were sun worshippers who lay on the beach from morning till night soaking in the rays. Daniel had always thought it strange that black people wanted to be white and white people wanted to be black. A bevy of beautiful girls were frolicking with a beach ball on the seashore as he waded gingerly into the warm water. They giggled and screeched as they threw the ball to one another, but Daniel had no eyes for them; he was in love and this time he was determined it was going to last. In fact he could not remember being more determined about anything in his entire life. The water was warm and very salty. Having swum several yards he turned on his back and floated, allowing the almost non-existent tides to take him where they wished.

When he came out of the water sometime later he felt exhilarated and very happy. It was so good to be away from London and his carnivorous friends. They would not miss him after the first few days, he knew that. They would be far too busy preying upon one another to notice his absence. They were like that. The only person that might give him a thought was Scoop and Daniel prayed that he would not suddenly take it upon himself to join him. Before going back to the hotel he had a *citron pressé* at a bar along the front and bought an English newspaper but there was nothing in it worth reading. The same old debs were going to the same old hunt balls and cocktail parties.

When Daniel arrived back at the hotel suite, he found that Alice had got up and was dressed. Though he still thought her beautiful she was looking very rough. She was not used to large quantities of booze, which Daniel found rather refreshing after all the drunken men and women he had come across during the past few years.

'How do you feel, my love?' he asked as he came into the room.

'Don't ask,' she groaned. 'I feel like death warmed up.'

'Is there anything I can get you?' he asked knowing full well that there was not. For all the pills and salts in the world are no match for a raging hangover. There were only two cures, one was time and the other was a large drink. Daniel was well aware that she would not care for the latter so he thought that it would not be prudent to offer it.

'Tell you what we'll do,' said Daniel enthusiastically.

'What?' she asked looking at herself in the mirror sorrowfully.

'Let's have a nice lunch together somewhere quiet. Just a little cold lobster and salad. It really will make you feel better, I promise.'

'If you like,' she replied without enthusiasm.

'Come along, sweetheart,' coaxed Daniel. 'You'll feel better soon.'

'I'll be all right,' she replied flatly.

They left the hotel with their arms about each other's waists and strolled along the street. After walking a short distance they came upon a tiny restaurant with tables on the pavement, covered with brightly coloured tablecloths.

'This looks a nice place,' remarked Daniel. 'Shall we eat here?'

'Yes, let's,' replied Alice who having breathed in some sea air had revived slightly.

They sat down at one of the tables and studied the menu. Daniel's French was almost non-existent, though he had been told by his friends that he pronounced the phrase 'Whisky,

syphon, la glace, garçon?' when drunk, in an accent indistinguishable from a Frenchman. He was also able to say 'Moja sestra je bolničarka crvenog krsta' in Serbo-Croatian though he had never found any use for it as, translated, it meant 'My sister is a Red Cross nurse'.

The waiter came over to the table and luckily spoke fluent English as all Frenchmen worth their salt should be able to do; at least you would think so, to listen to pompous city gents trying to make themselves understood along the Riviera.

'Could you tell me the way to the casino?' they demand dogmatically.

'Pardon, messieurs?' asks the old peasant.

'The casino, man, where is it?' shouts an Englishman going red in the face.

The peasant looks amused.

'Parlee voo Onglaise?' shouts the Englishman.

'No, pardon, monsieur,' smiles the peasant and shuffles off leaving the city gent in a frustrated rage.

Daniel ordered lobster and salad for two and a bottle of vin rosé, well iced, which was purely for medicinal purposes, for he knew that it would bring Alice out of her alcoholic remorse and reinstate her in the human race, a member of which she had not been feeling all morning.

When the waiter brought their order they ate it leisurely, sipped their wine sedately and talked about what they should do with their day. Alice said that she wanted to sunbathe as she looked very pretty with a suntan. Daniel remarked that she would only be gilding the lily, whereupon she smiled sweetly and blew him a kiss across the table. Daniel added that he wanted to take her to bed and stay there for a week.

'That's all men think about!' she exclaimed, somewhat primly considering her performance over the past forty-eight hours. 'I may be cock happy,' she went on hurriedly noticing the expression on his face. 'But that's not all I think about.'

'What else do you think about, my angel?' laughed Daniel.

'Lots of things.'

'Name one of them.'

'Millions of things.'

'Such as?'

'Well, er . . . such as clothes, for instance.'

'I wouldn't call that very elevated.'

'Maybe you wouldn't, but clothes are very important to a girl.'

'I prefer them without them.'

'That's what I would expect you to say. I told you you had a one-track mind.'

'I love you. I think you're absolutely marvellous.'

'Girls, girls, girls. That's all you ever think about,' she exclaimed, determined to have the last word on the subject.

'That's better than thinking about boys, boys, boys,' replied Daniel with a chuckle.

'Oh men . . .' said Alice, exasperated, and began to sulk.

'You're lovely, delicious, priceless and beautiful. You should be flattered that I fancy you every minute of the day and night,' teased Daniel making matters somewhat worse.

'You're a pig and I hate you.'

'You look ravishing when you're cross.'

'Don't speak to me.'

'I'll give you such a kiss in a minute.'

'If you touch me, I'll scream.'

'Now come along, darling. Don't spoil our holiday before it's even started.'

'Well, you started it.'

'How?'

'By only thinking of sex all the time.'

'I give up.'

Daniel beckoned to the waiter, who hurried over to the table.

'Could we have some coffee?' he asked.

'But certainly, monsieur. Is there anything else you require?'

‘Do you want anything else, darling?’ asked Daniel beaming across the table.

‘No, thank you,’ she replied curtly.

The waiter, knowing that a lover’s quarrel was in progress, smiled, knowingly shrugged his shoulders and discreetly departed. Daniel felt that it might be wiser not to say anything for a while, for from tiny acorns mighty oak trees grow, and so it was with little tiffs. If they were not controlled they often became raging arguments. A short time later the waiter brought a fresh pot of coffee and a white gardenia floating in a silver finger bowl which he charmingly presented to Alice, who smiled sweetly and thanked him profusely.

‘How beautiful!’ she exclaimed taking the flower from the bowl and holding it to her nose.

As the waiter walked away from the table he caught Daniel’s eye and winked. Daniel smiled gratefully.

‘Darling,’ said Alice completely forgetting that she was not talking to him. ‘Do you think it would look nice in my hair?’ She held the flower by her ear for his approval, for to disapprove would have been fatal.

‘Beautiful, darling,’ smiled Daniel.

After lunch they promenaded along the sea front, observing the many assorted holiday-makers on the beach. There were the inevitable pretty young girls some of whom were in the company of the inevitable pot-bellied old men who may not have been their fathers, muscle-bound young athletes, whose over-developed bodies glistened with suntan lotion. Alice smiled at them and Daniel hated them. There were mischievous young children with their mothers who scolded them mildly now and then for doing things that they should not be doing, such as pouring buckets of water over the fat old men when they were asleep.

- ‘Darling,’ said Alice squeezing his arm. ‘Can we go back to the hotel for a minute, I want to get my bikini?’

‘If you like,’ he replied and hailed a taxi.

When they reached the suite Alice went into the bedroom

and took her clothes off, which prompted Daniel to do the same. As she searched in a drawer for her bikini Daniel came up behind her and took her in his arms.

'Not now, darling,' she pleaded, 'I want to go for a swim. Anyway sex in the afternoon is depraved.'

'Who says so?' asked Daniel turning her around and kissing her on the lips, forcing his tongue between her teeth.

To begin with she tried hard not to respond, but feeling his rampant cock hard against her belly was more than she could stand. She dropped her bikini to the floor and threw her arms around his neck.

'Darling, you're very wicked,' she whispered, kissing him passionately. Without taking his lips from hers he picked her up and carried her across the room and dumped her on the bed. He was on top of her in a flash and methodically began to kiss her neck, then her breasts, working his way slowly down to her aching crotch.

'Darling, you're the most marvellous girl I have ever met in my life,' he said glancing up at her and extracting a pubic hair from his tongue with a forefinger and thumb. 'I want to lick you till you go crazy.'

'What's stopping you, my angel?' she asked looking down at him along the length of her body.

'Don't move, darling,' laughed Daniel, 'I've got a marvellous idea.'

'What is it?'

'You'll see.'

He slipped off the bed and went into the sitting-room, picked up the bottle of cherry brandy (duty free, bought on the aeroplane) from the sideboard, and brought it into the bedroom. Alice lay on her back with her legs wide apart. She looked up at him inquiringly.

'Darling!' she exclaimed. 'Surely you're not going to start drinking at a time like this?'

'Not in the way you think,' he replied, advancing towards her, bottle in hand. He sat on the edge of the bed and drew the

cork from the bottle. Then, holding it over her, he tilted it slightly until a few drops of the dark amber liquid splashed onto her breasts. Then lowering his head he licentiously licked her breasts and stomach until it was all gone. Alice squirmed ecstatically and stroked his head gently as his tongue explored her navel in search of the last drop.

‘That was a bit kinky, darling,’ she murmured. ‘Do it again.’

‘This is the most delicious way of getting pissed I have ever discovered,’ laughed Daniel, reaching for the bottle that he had placed on the floor beside the bed. He raised the bottle and was about to pour, when suddenly Alice moved her arm and in doing so knocked the neck of the bottle, which resulted in Daniel emptying almost the entire contents of it over her naked flesh. The brandy covered her breasts and stomach and ran down between her legs. She became galvanised, sat bolt upright and let out a piercing scream. For a moment Daniel was not sure what had happened until she leapt off the bed and ran around the room with her hands between her legs wailing like a banshee. The fiery spirit had run down her body and into her fabulous muffin.

‘You clumsy beast!’ she shrieked. ‘Flippin’ heck, you’ve ruined me for life.’

Daniel was at a loss as to what to do. He wondered if he should call room service, though what good they would be in a situation like this, he had no idea about.

‘Darling, is there anything I can do?’ asked Daniel trying to console her as she sat on the edge of the bed with a pillow stuffed between her legs rocking backwards and forwards in an effort to relieve the excruciating pain. She felt as though her womb was on fire. It was as though someone had rammed a white-hot poker up her.

‘Just leave me alone,’ she sobbed.

‘Tell you what,’ pleaded Daniel. ‘I’ll run you a bath. That ought to do the trick.’

Alice made no reply to this but got up and waddled to the

bathroom with the pillow still between her legs. She slammed the door and locked herself in. Daniel who had been sitting on the bed watching her go, suddenly smiled. The smile turned into a chuckle, which in turn became a raucous laugh, his body began to shake uncontrollably and he fell back onto the bed with tears streaming down his cheeks. Though he felt deeply sorry for poor Alice, he was unable to control himself. It was a bad joke but then, of course, bad jokes are more often than not the best kind. This was the kind of story that men told each other in pubs, with colourful descriptions. He wondered how Scoop would react if he told him about it. There was one thing for certain, and that was that it would be all over Fleet Street within twenty-four hours. At least thought Daniel as his laughter began to subside, she'll be well disinfected like a well-scrubbed urinal.

Meanwhile, in the bathroom Alice was squatting on the bidet with the cold water turned full on. Though the burning still raged inside her, it was beginning to abate a little. She had never felt more humiliated or outraged than at this precise moment. She saw this as a punishment from God for being a wanton nymphomaniac and vowed that she would turn her back on men—though not literally—and become a nun. After a while she got off the bidet and walked painfully over to the medicine cabinet and took out a plastic bag which contained her douche and a length of rubber tube. She filled the douche with water, fixed the tube to the end of it and pushed the other end inside her. Then raising one leg onto the lavatory seat she squeezed the bulb filling herself with water. Fucking hell she thought, the things that girls have to put up with. The ignominy of it all, Dutch caps, French letters, Tampax, menstrual napkins, birth control pills that made you feel dizzy, K.Y. And what for? Men too drunk to *come* and young boys who want to *come* five times a night. She would become a nun and that would be an end to it. -

'Are you all right, darling?' called Daniel through the door.

She did not reply.

'Darling.'

He was becoming more urgent. 'Still she did not reply. Daniel tried the door but found it locked.

'Please, sweetheart. Are you all right?' he begged.

'I am still alive, if that's what you want to know,' she replied coldly.

'I'm sorry, darling, really I am. Please open the door.'

'Go away.'

'Please, darling, it was an accident, honestly it was.'

'Leave me alone.'

'Now, don't be silly. Open the door.'

'I never want to see you again,' she hoped that she meant it.

'What more can I say? I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!'

'All right, you're sorry. Now go away. I want to be left alone for a while.'

'Oh, all right, but I'll be back in time to take you for a nice dinner this evening.'

'I shan't want any.'

'Please, darling, open the door?' he pleaded.

'You never give up, do you?'

'Not when I am in love.'

'You make me sick,' she knew that this conversation must not continue for if it did she would find herself relenting.

'You'll feel better later, my darling. I love you. Please don't forget that.'

'Swine,' she thought and squeezed the douche. It made a gurgling sound like water going down the plug hole.

Daniel went back to the bedroom, put on a pair of tight-fitting bright blue trousers and a blue and white striped T-shirt and left the suite.

Alice heard the door close and after a short pause cautiously opened the bathroom door and peeped out. When she was certain that he was gone she put on a white bath-robe and went into the bedroom. Locking the door behind her, she threw her-

self onto the bed and cried into the pillows. It was hopeless, she knew that, utterly hopeless; she could no more change what she felt about Daniel than fly over the moon. It was too late for that, miles and miles too late, so where was the use in fighting it?

Chapter Seven

Daniel wandered miserably and aimlessly along the sea front. The joke had gone sour and was no longer funny. He had hurt and even destroyed a good many girls in his time but never like this. His speciality had always been that good old standby mental cruelty. He would argue logically, though always unfairly, with girls until he had rendered them completely helpless. They became like jelly under his verbal administration. Then, when they were virtually on the verge of suicide, he would change his tactics and become the charming ardent lover. But only until they felt secure again; then he would begin the torture once more.

He did not understand why he did it, and was indeed deeply ashamed of himself for it. Maybe it was some kind of deep-rooted insecurity. It was certainly true that he felt that women were hunting him down and that once he let one of them capture him she would cage him up for the rest of his life. She would feed him, love him, stroke him and ultimately tame him. The very thought of it appalled him. That is to say up until now. With Alice he thought of it differently. He would have loved to be tied to her, hand and foot, so that she would be the first thing he saw when he woke up in the morning and the last thing he saw before falling asleep. If that was not love...?!!!

It came to him in a blazing, blinding flash that he must marry her! There was simply no other alternative. No. Alternative was the wrong word, he must marry her because without her his life would not be worth living. Good God, it had happened, the one thing that he had vowed would never happen to him as long as he lived. It was a macabre joke from life's Babylonian gag book. He suddenly had a mental

picture of what it was going to be like, the vision was too preposterous, so utterly absurd that he began to laugh. The joke was on him right enough, what on earth would Scoop O'Toole say? He would probably laugh so heartily that he would give himself a heart attack. Without exception his ex-lovers would be delighted to hear that he had at last been snared.

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by someone calling his name.

'Cooeeeee, Daniel!'

He glanced behind him and saw a most frightful apparition bearing down on him. She was wearing shocking-pink Bermuda shorts that showed off her varicose veins to their best advantage and a bright green silk shirt which, in conjunction with the shorts, made Daniel's eyes dance. She was also wearing very high-heeled mules and an enormous floppy straw hat, from under which sprouted tufts of bright orange hair. Her face glistened with suntan oil and her lips were caked with scarlet lipstick. The finishing touch to the ensemble was a gigantic pair of sun-glasses so black that whilst the viewer could plainly see out, no one could see in.

'Cooeeec, Daniel!' she shrieked again, rushing up to him.

'My God, it's Bubbles!' thought Daniel as she streaked up to him. 'That's all I need.'

'And who, may I ask, are you hiding from?' he asked with a wry smile as she threw her arms about his neck.

'What on earth do you mean, darling?' exclaimed Bubbles, planting a fat wet kiss on his cheek, which left an enormous impression of her lips behind it.

'Never mind,' replied Daniel noncommittally.

'Don't be camp, darling!' she exclaimed.

Daniel had never heard Bubbles say anything in all the years that he had known her. Every word she uttered was either shrieked or exclaimed.

'I didn't know you were here. You should have sent me a cable that you were coming. Where are you staying? Who is with you? Is she nice? Do I know her?!'

Daniel was beginning to wilt under the onslaught.

'She's not your type, she's normal,' he teased.

'I say, darling, how dreadful! God, how I hate normal people. Except you, of course, my angel!'

'That's the rich tapestry of life, my sweet,' he smiled warmly this time.

Actually, although Bubbles was inclined to be a bit of a trial at times, Daniel had always liked her. In many ways she was a very kind and sympathetic person. They had met at a party some years before where both had got paralytically drunk and by some caprice found themselves in bed together. She had let him kiss her and finger her a little, but when he was about to climb over her she suddenly informed him that she was a lesbian. They both found the situation excruciatingly funny and burst into fits of uncontrollable, hysterical laughter. They had subsequently become close friends. She was, in fact, the only woman with whom he had managed to have a platonic relationship. He occasionally rang her up when he was having trouble with one of his aviary of young girls. More often than not Bubbles had been only too delighted to take her off his hands. Indeed, one of the greatest loves of her life had been a discarded lover of Daniel's. Ultimately the sweet girl had become greedy and began demanding extortionate sums of money for her love. Upon realising that Bubbles was by no means a push-over when it came to extortion, she went berserk with a pair of outsize scissors and cut up every article of clothing in Bubbles's wardrobe, including her mink coat. Whereupon Bubbles threw her out and continued her unending search for happiness.

'Darling, let's go and have a little drinky boo,' shrieked Bubbles, promenading him across the street in the direction of a tourist-infested bar.

'All right,' said Daniel, reluctantly allowing himself to be propelled along, for though he was pleased to see her he was in no mood to go on a toot. 'But only one, I have to get back to my hotel.'

Everyone swivelled round to gawp at them. Daniel ordered two cinzanos at the bar and then led Bubbles to a corner table.

'Darling, it's absolutely super to see you!' she gushed. 'I can hardly tell you how dreary it has been here this season. Bobby Boyce-Liskeard came over last weekend, or was it the weekend before, and told me all about your accident. That was a bit mad, wasn't it?'

She glanced at his hands lying on the table in front of her. They were now almost completely healed, though the black scabs looked slightly unattractive.

'They're almost better now,' remarked Daniel flatly in a tone of voice that Bubbles recognised as meaning that he did not want to discuss the matter any further.

'Anyway, darling, apart from Lady Bobby, simply no one has been here worth mentioning. Everyone has gone to Corfu this season, my dear. They tell me it is quite the chic thing to do.'

'You don't say?'

'But I do say, darling. Listen, darling, why don't we hire a tiny yacht and pop down there? If I spend another day in this dreadful place I will go utterly insane . . .'

'No,' said Daniel, interrupting her.

'Whatever is the matter with you, my baby? You don't seem your normal self. Now come on, tell Bubbles all about it.'

'I've just been thinking, that's all.'

'Darling. How quaint! What about?'

'Life.'

'My dearest angel, you shouldn't do that. There's far too much of it about.'

Bubbles noticed a middle-aged couple eyeing her from a nearby table. She had been yelling at the top of her voice and gesticulating wildly since the moment they had entered the bar, and the middle-aged couple who had never seen anything like her before in their lives had become transfixed.

'What are you staring at, darling?' she shouted, pointing a long pink fingernail at the middle-aged lady. The couple

averted their eyes hastily and sipped their drinks nervously. the lady going scarlet to the roots of her hair.

'Bubbles,' began Daniel hesitantly, 'if I tell you something, will you promise not to laugh?'

'All right, darling. What is it?' Bubbles made a preposterous attempt to look serious.

'For God's sake, keep your voice down,' begged Daniel.

'All right, darling, don't lose your temper,' replied Bubbles in a moderate tone of voice which was still by no means a whisper.

'I am thinking of getting married,' said Daniel bluntly.

Bubbles was so thunderstruck by this remark that for a moment she was completely stunned. Then slowly her face relaxed into a smile, which turned into a giggle, which turned into a chuckle, which she tried in vain to stifle. Within moments she could control herself no longer, a roar of laughter burst from her lungs, the intensity of which sent the middle-aged couple scurrying out of the door.

'Darling, you're a proper caution,' roared Bubbles. 'You really shouldn't tell me jokes like that!'

'But I am not joking,' replied Daniel smiling broadly, not entirely unaware of the humour of the situation.

'But, darling, you simply *have* to be joking,' she exclaimed, the tears rolling down her cheeks. Her laugh was so infectious that Daniel could not help giving way to it himself. For a time they were both speechless with laughter. Daniel realised that he had made a rather unfair request in asking Bubbles not to laugh at this ludicrous turn of events. For Daniel's marriage must surely make the most unlikely headline ever to appear in a newspaper.

'And who, may I ask, is the lucky girl?' choked Bubbles.

'I don't think you know her,' replied Daniel.

Bubbles had begun laughing again with renewed zest and was incapable of continuing the conversation for five minutes, by the end of which time the management were beginning to show concern.

'Bubbles, do, please, stop it,' begged Daniel. 'You'll get us thrown out.'

'But darling,' she choked. 'That's the funniest thing I have heard in my life!'

Slowly her laughter subsided. She took a bright red silk handkerchief from her huge handbag and wiped her eyes.

'Would you like to come to dinner tonight and meet her?' asked Daniel.

'Darling, I should be delighted!' she exclaimed having now regained her composure, though still letting out occasional chuckles.

'Hotel Negresco, suite one hundred and seventeen, seven thirty, all right?'

'Darling, I can't wait!'

'Well, I must get back now,' said Daniel, getting up from the table and crossing to the counter where he paid for the drinks. They left the bar arm in arm, with the patron standing at the door watching them as they walked off up the street, an expression of complete amazement on his face.

Daniel parted company with Bubbles at the corner of the street, and wandered off in the direction of his hotel, completely sure that what he was about to do was the right thing. He had been a waster long enough he thought, it was now going to be 'love and roses all the way'. He would take care of her, and they would have children. How wonderful it must be to have a son or a daughter, especially a daughter, and watch her grow. Daniel thought that he knew all the pitfalls in life, having fallen into most of them himself. He could make sure that his daughter avoided them, it was all going to be wonderful, absolutely heavenly.

He arrived at his hotel suite to find that Alice was now completely over the regrettable accident. As he entered the sitting-room she was sitting by the window in an armchair, dressed in a clinging summer dress with a low neckline. The sun shone

through the window and made her hair glitter like spun gold. She looked so beautiful that his heart leapt into his mouth and butterflies flapped their wings in his stomach. She glanced in his direction and smiled radiantly.

'Darling,' she said softly. 'I'm sorry I was so stupid. I really don't know what comes over me at times.'

'Please, darling, there's nothing to be sorry for,' replied Daniel coming over to her and sitting on the arm of the chair. 'It was all my fault. Let's forget it, shall we?' He stroked her hair gently and bending over kissed her lightly on the forehead. 'I ran into a friend of mine along the front and asked her to dinner. You don't mind, do you? I'm sure you'll like her a lot. She's great fun.'

'I don't mind if you don't, but let us be alone for at least part of the evening, can we?'

'Of course, my baby. I'll get rid of her after dinner.'

'I really do love being here with you,' said Alice. 'I want to stay with you for ever.'

'Darling, will you marry me?' He asked it bluntly. For a moment Alice could not believe her ears, indeed neither could Daniel.

'You're joking,' she replied rather unromantically.

'I hate to tell you but I have never been more serious in my life,' he replied earnestly.

Alice flew into his arms and nestled on his chest.

'Do you really mean it, darling?' she whispered. 'I mean to say it's so sudden; we have hardly known . . .'

Daniel interrupted her by lifting her chin and kissing her on the lips.

'Of course I mean it,' he said. 'I love you so much that I do not think I could survive one day without you.'

'Darling,' she breathed.

'Well, what do you say?'

'What do you think?'

'Sweetheart, I don't want to have to think,' he replied gently. 'I want to hear you say it.'

'The answer, my darling, is Yes!' she exclaimed. 'YES! YES! YES!'

Daniel kissed her passionately on the lips and held her close to him. Well, there it is, I have done it now, he thought, but then you'll never break your neck if you don't take a step.

'Darling, tomorrow we will go out and buy you the most beautiful engagement ring in the whole world.'

'I love you,' she whispered with tears welling up in her eyes.

Bubbles arrived at the hotel punctually at seven thirty looking even more extraordinary than usual, which was hardly possible. She was wearing a black shiny leather two-piece suit that fitted her so tightly that it threatened to burst its seams with every step that she took. The hotel clerk gaped at her as she came through the glass doors and swept across the lobby in his direction. She was dressed for action, and any girl over fourteen and under sixty had best beware.

'Would you please tell Mr Valler that I am here?' she belated. 'Suite one hundred and seventeen I think it is, darling!' The young clerk blushed and reached for the phone, while Bubbles stood drumming her vicious-looking fingernails on the desk.

'Come along, young man. Don't take all night about it,' she roared.

'Yes, madam, of course. I'm terribly sorry,' muttered the clerk dialling the number of Daniel's suite.

Bubbles dearly loved to frighten the life out of young men, one of her greatest delights in life was to render them helpless under her lashing tongue, though only verbally.

The phone rang in Daniel's suite, he swore, looked at his watch and got up from the couch where he had been lying with Alice.

'Good Lord, is that the time already?' he said crossing the room towards the jangling phone.

Alice adjusted her panties and pulled her skirt down over her knees.

'Hello!' shouted Daniel into the receiver.

'Good evening, sir,' began the clerk. 'There is a lady here to see you . . .'

Before he could say more Bubbles had snatched the phone out of his hand and was shouting into the mouthpiece.

'Darling, it's me. Shall I come up?'

'Hello, Bubbles. Yes, why don't you do that? One hundred and seventeen.'

'Be right up, darling!' she shrieked and banged down the receiver.

'Be an angel and send up a bottle of champagne to Mr Valler's suite.'

'Certainly, madam,' smiled the clerk.

'You're a doll!' she exclaimed and rushed off in the direction of the lift.

'Now, I don't want you to be frightened of Bubbles,' said Daniel as they sat waiting for her arrival.

'Why should I be?' asked Alice.

'Well, she's a bit disarming when you first meet her, to say the least of it.'

'Oh.'

'... And, well, you see the thing is she's a little kinky for beautiful young girls.'

'Do you mean she's a dyke?' laughed Alice.

'As a matter of fact it is funny that you should say that, because that is exactly what I mean,' replied Daniel using far too many words to say Yes.

At that moment there was a knock on the door.

'Come in,' called Daniel.

The door opened and Bubbles came gushing in. The sight of her made Alice jump off the couch and back away. She also let out an audible gasp.

'Now then, my dear, don't be shy!' screamed Bubbles rushing across the room and claspng Alice to her bosom. 'It's only your aunty Bubbles come to inspect the blushing bride.'

'Now then, take it easy, dear,' said Daniel noticing that Alice was somewhat distressed.

'Don't be silly, cuntie. I've got to get to know your fiancée if I'm going to be matron of honour at your wedding, haven't I?' shouted Bubbles giving Alice another squeeze.

'Now, come and sit down like a good girl,' smiled Daniel, tearing her away from Alice and dumping her into an arm-chair. 'Now then,' he went on. 'May I introduce you to Alice, er . . . Alice, do you know, I don't know what your other name is?' laughed Daniel. He had booked the suite in his name to save her any embarrassment.

'Walker,' said Alice, rather embarrassed about having such a common surname.

'Is it really? What a nice name,' said Daniel gallantly. 'This is Bubbles, one of my dearest friends. You mustn't mind her, she's really quite harmless.'

Bubbles beamed at Alice who smiled demurely back.

'Right, now that everyone knows everyone else, let's have a drink,' said Daniel.

'I've ordered a bottle of champagne, darling,' shouted Bubbles.

'Splendid,' smiled Daniel, whereupon there was a knock at the door and the wine waiter wheeled in a trolley containing a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice and three glasses. The waiter opened the bottle expertly, making the conventional loud pop. Daniel hated champagne that only fizzled when the cork was pulled out.

'Well,' said Daniel handing them a glass each. 'What shall we drink to?'

'May all your troubles be little ones?' suggested Bubbles, laughing at her own corny joke.

'What about champagne to our real friends and real pain to our sham friends?' said Daniel raising his glass. 'It is by no means an original toast, but I can't think of a better one.'

They raised their glasses and drank.

'I honestly hope that you will both be very happy,' muttered Bubbles.

'What did you say, darling?' asked Daniel astonished to hear her say something without an exclamation mark on the end of it.

'Darling, I said that I hope you will be very happy!' yelled Bubbles.

'We will, don't you worry about that,' he replied going over to Alice and putting his arm around her waist.

They had several more glasses of champagne, and when the bottle was empty Daniel rang the restaurant and booked a table for dinner.

The dinner party was very gay, and Bubbles was the life and soul of it. She insulted the waiters with such charm that they loved her for it. When any of the other customers glanced in her direction, having overheard an outrageous remark, she blew them kisses and waved wildly. And when Daniel excused himself to go to the gents halfway through the meal, Bubbles volunteered some motherly advice to Alice about how to handle a husband. She also made Alice promise that she would always take good care of Daniel.

'You see, darling,' said Bubbles, 'I have a feeling that this is his last chance of real happiness. I am sure that it comes as no surprise to you to hear that he has had literally hundreds of affairs, but never once has he thought of getting married. He is very moody and difficult so you will have to be extra loving and patient.'

'I'll try, honestly I will,' replied Alice passionately.

'No girl can do more than her best. If ever you are in trouble and need help, don't hesitate to call on me, dear,' said Bubbles and dropped the subject, for she noticed Daniel coming back into the room and heading in the direction of the table.

'Darling, you came back too soon. We hardly had a chance to talk about you at all!' laughed Bubbles as he sat down.

'What has she been telling you, my angel?' Daniel squeezed Alice's hand.

‘Only nice things, really.’

‘I bet! She only says nice things about people she hates, don’t you, dear?’ he parted Bubbles’s cheek.

‘Don’t be so rude, darling!’ replied Bubbles. ‘And order me a large brandy.’

Daniel called the waiter over and ordered some brandy all round.

Half an hour later Alice softly kicked Daniel’s shin and when he looked at her, made a sign with her eyes that she wanted to go. Bubbles who had never missed a trick in her life also got the message.

‘All right, darlings!’ she screamed. ‘I’m going. I know you want to be alone. But first you must tell me the date of the wedding. And also when you are going back to London?’

‘Give us a chance,’ said Daniel, ‘we have only just arrived . . .’

‘Just so long as you don’t go off without telling me, deary!’ interrupted Bubbles.

‘We wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing, would we, darling?’

‘Of course not,’ smiled Alice coyly.

‘Before I go I want to give you a little present!’ exclaimed Bubbles, taking an enormous topaz ring off the third finger of her left hand and handing it to Alice.

‘I couldn’t really . . .’ she began.

‘Now don’t be silly, darling. I want you to have it. It is not every day that our Daniel gets himself engaged.’

‘But really . . .’ pleaded Alice.

‘Now don’t argue with me, cuntie! Or I shall be cross with you, my baby!’ roared Bubbles, a dark cloud for an instant passing across her face.

‘You’d better take it while the going is good,’ joked Daniel. ‘It is not often that Bubbles dishes out the family jewellery.’

He was secretly deeply moved by her gesture. It was a sincere act of friendship towards him, he knew that, and it also

meant that she approved of Alice. Bubbles had a dear sweet heart under that veneer of coarse bitchiness.

To Daniel's intense relief, Alice accepted the ring and slipped it on the third finger of her right hand.

'I'm afraid it is a little too big,' she said.

'Never mind, ducky. You can easily have it taken in a bit.' Bubbles leant across the table and kissed Alice on the cheek.

'Thank you so much. I will treasure it always,' said Alice demurely.

'Now don't get sentimental, girl. If he ever leaves you in the lurch, you ought to be able to get a few quid for it.'

'Don't worry, that will never happen. I will keep him for ever,' said Alice, squeezing Daniel's hand.

'Now, my children, I will leave you to fuck the night away,' shouted Bubbles getting up from the table. 'But don't forget that people will count the months from the time you get married to the birth of your first child.' Then, without another word, she kissed them both and swept out of the restaurant, with waiters bowing low to her all the way to the door.

'I think she's marvellous!' exclaimed Alice.

'So do I,' he smiled. 'Come on, let's get to bed.'

'That's all you ever think about,' she replied with a saucy grin.

'And that's all you think about, as well.'

'You're right, darling,' she winked, 'let's go.'

Daniel signed the bill and they left.

For two weeks they lay on the beach, getting a rich brown tan, drank champagne, made passionate love, ate exotic dishes and were sublimely happy. Though Bubbles came to lunch a couple of times, they only really had eyes for each other. Bubbles who oddly enough could be discreet when she cared to, kept out of their way as much as she could, though she could hardly be expected to leave them entirely alone. Daniel bought Alice a rather inexpensive engagement ring, not that she could not have had the most expensive one that money

could buy. The jeweller had shown them trays and trays of diamond-encrusted rings, the sight of which would have made any girl's heart pound. But Alice had thought them all rather vulgar and had settled for a tiny platinum ring set with one small ruby. She had shown it to Bubbles one day, when they met at the hairdresser's.

'Very nice, dear,' Bubbles had sniffed. 'But don't you think it is a little on the small side?'

'I think it's beautiful,' Alice had smiled demurely.

'Ain't love grand!' screamed Bubbles, 'But remember, dear, you can carry this love lark too far! Don't think Daniel would be pleased that you chose that ring because it was cheap, and really all the time you wanted one of the others! Because he wouldn't, dear. You can take that from me.'

'But I simply adore it!' cried Alice enthusiastically.

'That's all right then, ducky!' said Bubbles.

Daniel's hands healed quickly under the hot sun and sea air. They did not think of going home, nor did Daniel mention it until the middle of the third week, when they were sunbathing on the beach.

'Darling, do we have to?' she asked sadly. 'It's so wonderful here and I am so happy I want to stay for ever.'

'But we must get home sometime, my sweet,' replied Daniel. 'Anyway, it doesn't matter where we go so long as we are together, does it?' he added taking her face in his hands and kissing her eyelids.

'I do love you,' she breathed. 'You won't ever leave me, will you?'

'What do you think?' smiled Daniel.

'Oh darling!' she cried hurling herself on top of him and showering his bronzed chest with kisses.

'Hey, hey, hey!' said Daniel, somewhat surprised by the sudden gush of abject veneration.

'I want to eat you all up,' she replied giving him a sly look out of the corner of her eye.

'Don't be greedy,' he scolded, pushing her gently away.

‘Listen,’ he went on, trying to change the subject. ‘Do you know what I am going to do as soon as we are married?’

‘What, darling?’

‘I am going to buy a little cottage in the country with roses around the door, just like in the story books. What do you think of that?’

‘Heavenly!’

‘So what do you think? Shall we go back at the weekend?’ he asked.

‘All right, darling. Anything you say. So long as we are together and you love me.’

‘Good,’ said Daniel. ‘Now stop being an old sloshpot and rub some of that suntan oil on my chest.’

With that he lay back and closed his eyes, and began to muse yet again on the ways of women.

Daniel decided that he would throw a cocktail party in his suite on the eve of their departure, to which he invited Bubbles and anyone whom she might care to bring, which he fully realised was tempting providence somewhat, but was worth risking. The party was to be from six till eight in the evening after which he would take Alice out to dinner and maybe to the Folies club.

It was Alice’s first real experience at playing the hostess and Daniel greatly enjoyed watching her fussing about making the arrangements. Dressed in a rather exotic house suit of silver satin, looking somewhat like a nineteen-twenties film star, she summoned both the majordomo and the le sommelier to the suite and instructed them to supply half a dozen bottles of Krug ’59, two bottles of Bell’s whisky, Daniel’s favourite brand, two bottles of gin, one of vodka and one of cinzano; also some caviar with chopped egg and onion which though it is thought to be in rather bad taste in some quarters was Daniel’s favourite way of having it, some canapés, pâté de foie gras and toast. Though the waiters had recommended most of the aforementioned fare, they had cunningly made it appear as though she had ordered it herself, by subtly suggesting

something in a roundabout and half-hearted manner and then enthusiastically complimenting her on her impeccable taste when she agreed with them.

Bubbles arrived on the dot of six looking as fantastic as ever in the company of two pretty but stupid-looking girls, who were introduced to Daniel and Alice as Margaret and Elizabeth. Bubbles discreetly informed Daniel a little later on that she had only met them on the beach that afternoon but that she thought that they were all right, at least she hoped so. The waiters mingled with the guests carrying trays of drinks and plates of food.

After a while Elizabeth got Daniel into a corner and began to tell him about a book she had just read. She had forgotten the title and the author's name, but remembered that it was a thick book with thin pages and fine print and that she hoped to read it again sometime. Daniel was saved from this idiotic conversation by the arrival of a distinguished-looking middle-aged actor, whom Daniel had met a couple of times in the hotel bar whilst waiting for Alice to arrive back from the hair-dresser or a shopping spree.

His name was Sir Morton Thorogood. He had been knighted by King George VI for his contribution to the living theatre in 1946, but had been a great embarrassment to the country a year later—even though he was acquitted—by getting himself arrested for importuning a young Welsh Guardsman in the gents' lavatory in Piccadilly Circus tube station. Though the case was played down in the press, the mud stuck. He, therefore, had no alternative but to leave the country and try his luck elsewhere. Hollywood had welcomed him with open arms, and he made a fortune as a film star. He was extremely wealthy, and though he would now be welcomed back to the English stage he did not care to take up any of the many offers which had come to him from many managements including the Royal Shakespeare Company. He had continued to use his title more for business reasons than any other, the Americans dearly love a peer.

But he admitted to getting a rather perverse pleasure out of the knowledge that he had beaten the system at its own game. They had not found him out until it was too late, a rare thing in the British Isles. Morton, when drunk, often gloated over the red faces that there must have been in the government, when they realised what a mistake they had made in recommending to the King that he dub Mr Morton Thorogood 'Sir'. For himself he did not give a damn about it, nor did he have the slightest conscience. To him, being homosexual was no crime, nor indeed was it anything to be ashamed of. Ten per cent of all the men in the world were queer and he was delighted and honoured to be their peer. He thought Daniel an absolute cup of tea.

Though their numbers were few, the party soon gathered momentum. Predictably, this was due mainly to Bubbles who wasted no time in getting very drunk and was shouting and yelling at the top of her voice at one or another of the guests and waiters. She persisted in calling Sir Morton 'cuntie' at the top of her voice, which embarrassed Daniel quite a bit but Morton not at all. On the contrary, he enjoyed it immensely.

'Tell me, cuntie, have you ever been robbed by a bit of rough trade?' she yelled at Morton, who was sitting not more than two feet away from her on the couch.

'Now and then,' he smiled mildly.

'God, cuntie, what a stinking world we live in. They are all out to rob us. Get me another fucking drink.'

'Certainly, dear,' he replied beckoning to a passing waiter.

'Take that scrubber over there, cuntie,' she continued, pointing at Margaret. 'I bet she's absolutely dreadful in bed but thinks her cunt is worth a million fucking pounds.'

The waiter brought a tray of drinks from which Bubbles grabbed a glass, emptied it down her throat and snatched another.

'Now take it easy, dear, or you'll make yourself sick,' said Morton sympathetically.

'I don't give a fuck if I do, cuntie,' she screamed, taking a great gulp from the second glass.

Elizabeth tottered over to where Bubbles and Morton were sitting and plonked herself down next to them.

'Hello, deary! How's your cunt?' asked Bubbles putting her hand up Elizabeth's skirt. Elizabeth was too drunk to care about what Bubbles was doing and made no attempt to stop her.

'Bubbles, darling, the waiters!' remarked Morton in a stage whisper.

'Fuck the waiters!' screamed Bubbles, fumbling about in Elizabeth's underclothes with renewed zest.

Margaret and Alice went out onto the verandah and got into a deep discussion about clothes, makeup and men. Though the party should have ended at eight o'clock it was still raging at nine thirty, and Daniel, who with a superhuman effort had managed to stay sober up until now, was beginning to show signs of drunkenness. Bubbles had disappeared into the bedroom with Elizabeth half an hour before and frightful noises were coming from the other side of the door. Morton, also drunk, was striking Shakespearian poses and quoting long passages from *Lower Depths* at Margaret, who had passed out on the couch: 'We must take her out of here,' he quoted, 'Out into the hall. This is no place for corpses—but for the living . . . etc.'

Alice was clinging to Daniel in a corner, begging him to love her always and always until death. The waiters had long since departed, leaving them to serve themselves. They alone had stuck to the hours six till eight—union rules and the boredom of watching other people enjoy themselves.

'Come on, sweetheart. Let's get out of here,' said Daniel.

'What about the others?' asked Alice.

'Let them get on with it. I can't bear it another moment,' he replied, taking her by the arm and leading her towards the door. In the lobby the manager approached Daniel and asked him if the party was over. By way of reply Daniel threw

his hands in the air, shrugged his shoulders and went through the glass swing doors into the street, dragging Alice in his wake.

They went to a nearby restaurant for dinner but were both rather too drunk to enjoy it, much to the annoyance of the chef who came from his kitchen to inquire if anything was wrong. Daniel apologised profusely and the chef walked away mumbling to himself. They left the restaurant an hour later but Daniel thought it unwise to return to the hotel too early, for he knew from long experience of these things that once a party got going it would not finish until the bitter end. He knew too that if he went back to the suite he would join in and no doubt disgrace himself the worst of the lot. So he decided that there was nothing else for it, but that they must go and stay in another hotel for the night. So going into a phone box he rang several hotels until he found one that had a room for the night. Which was just as well, for when they returned to the Negresco at eleven o'clock the next morning, he found Bubbles still fast asleep in their bed. Margaret and Elizabeth had gone as had Sir Morton Thorogood, which was not surprising in his case, considering that he lived in the hotel.

Making as little noise as possible, they bathed, changed their clothes and packed their bags. Then leaving a note for Bubbles they rang for the porter to come for the luggage, then went down to the desk, paid the bill, which somehow or other had leapt by a further forty-five pounds, due to the activities of the night before. The day before Daniel had had the foresight to book two seats on the plane to Paris, where Alice said that she would like to buy a couple of dresses at Dior before catching the night flight to London. Daniel cabled Scoop of their time of arrival, asking him to bring the car to London airport.

Chapter Eight

The plane bound for London was held up at Le Bourget for two hours due to a mechanical fault. This had a chain reaction on Scoop O'Toole who had arrived at the London air terminal on time to meet the plane at the original time of arrival, and upon being told that the plane would be late, had lost his temper, gone into the bar and got drunk as quick as a flash.

When at last the plane arrived Daniel looked around for Scoop who was nowhere to be found. He had Scoop's name called over the loudspeakers without success, so he came to the conclusion that he had either not been able to come, or had got bored with waiting and gone back to town. However, when he came out of the airport building and saw his car parked at the entrance, he knew that Scoop must surely be around somewhere. He did not have to guess twice where.

Telling Alice to wait for him by the car he went directly to the bar where he found Scoop slumped at a corner table. Daniel smiled and went over to him.

'Still at the squirt game, you old soak!' he exclaimed, tapping him on the shoulder.

Scoop looked up at him bleary-eyed and smiled showing his nicotine-stained false teeth.

'Where the bleedin' hell you been, me ol' mate? I've been waiting for you for bleedin' hours.'

'The plane got held up. Come on, let's go.' Scoop lurched to his feet and followed Daniel out of the door.

'You haven't half got a nice suntan, Daniel. What did it cost you? Twenty-five quid a square inch?'

'Something like that,' replied Daniel, helping Scoop onto the down escalator, which turned out to be no mean feat, as

he was by no means very steady on his feet. Eventually they got to the ground floor and out of the building.

'Give us the car keys,' said Daniel.

Scoop fumbled in his pocket and handed them to Daniel, who unlocked the boot, dumped the suitcases inside and unlocked the car doors. The three of them piled in with Daniel sliding behind the wheel. His hands now having completely healed, he was well able to drive the car.

When they got to town Daniel drove to the West End and dumped Scoop at the Vulture Room putting him in charge of the doorman. He then drove home and was rather pleased to be back in the familiar surroundings of his own flat. Alice said that she was tired and went straight to bed, but Daniel said that he would like a drink before he turned in.

The following morning Alice woke early and got up to make the tea, which she brought into the bedroom on a tray. Daniel opened his eyes and looked up at her.

'I suppose you know you're the most beautiful girl in the world,' he said opening his arms to her.

She put the tray down on the bedside table and sat down on the edge of the bed. He took her in his arms and kissed her passionately.

'Ouch!' she exclaimed pushing him away. 'Your beard scratches.'

'You'll have to get used to that,' he smiled.

'Darling,' she began as she poured out the tea. 'There is something that I absolutely must do today.'

'And what is that, my sweet?' he asked.

'I must phone my parents and tell them about you. Would you like to come down next weekend?'

'Where?'

'To our house in Sussex?'

'Do I have to?'

'Well, you'll have to meet them sometime, won't you?'

'I suppose so, but we only got back last night. Can't we put it off for a while?'

'Why don't we get it over with? Anyway you never know, you might even like them,' she said handing him a cup of tea.

'I suppose, if I must I must,' said Daniel without enthusiasm.

'I love you,' she said ruffling his hair. 'They won't eat you, honestly they won't.' She smiled, an ingenuous glint in her eyes.

'All right, all right, I've said I'll come, haven't I?' said Daniel. 'Let's not talk about it any more,' he added, hoping that something would come up before the weekend which would prevent him from going. 'What time is it?' he asked sipping his tea.

Alice glanced at his wrist-watch on the bedside table.

'Quarter to nine,' she replied.

'I think I had better get up. There is a lot to do today,' he said.

'Can we have one last cuddle?' she asked taking the cup out of his hand and laying it down on the tray.

'Greedy guts,' laughed Daniel hugging her close to him.

'Darling,' she whispered nestling on his shoulder, 'I have never been so happy in my life. If you ever leave me I will die.'

'Please don't talk like that,' he replied easing himself out from under her. 'None of us know what our lot is going to be. It is best just to live one moment at a time. Do you understand?'

'I think so but . . .'

'No buts, darling. Go and put some water in the bath for me, there's a good girl.'

'Your slightest wish is my command,' she joked, standing to attention and giving him a mock salute.

'Go on, get out of here and stop messing about.' Daniel reached for a cigarette.

Whilst Daniel was in the bath, Alice went into the kitchen in search of some food for breakfast. Finding the refrigerator and cupboard bare, she slipped on some clothes, popped down to

the supermarket at the end of the street, and bought a fresh loaf of bread, some butter, eggs, coffee, sugar and marmalade, and was back before Daniel had a chance to miss her. When he came out of the bathroom, he heard the sound of cooking coming from the kitchen. He peeped around the door and saw Alice busying herself scrambling eggs and making toast.

'Darling, you don't have to do that,' he said going up behind her.

'Don't be silly, of course I do. A good breakfast will set you up for the day.'

Daniel felt that it would be cruel to tell her that he hardly ever ate breakfast, especially as she had gone to so much trouble. So instead he kissed her lightly on the end of her nose and went into the bedroom to get dressed. He opened the wardrobe door, took out a dove-grey suit and laid it on the bed. From the chest of drawers he took a clean cream shirt and a pair of black nylon socks and searched under the bed until he found a pair of blue suède shoes. Then after sprinkling himself with Hypnotique talcum powder he got dressed. He was tying his shoe-laces when Alice called.

'Breakfast is ready.'

'I'll be right there,' answered Daniel, having a final look at himself in the mirror to satisfy himself that he looked as handsome and immaculate as ever.

Alice had laid the kitchen table very neatly. This was her first day of playing house; she was determined to make a good job of it. Though he smiled and told her what a clever girl he thought she was, Daniel was not sure that he liked what she was doing. It was true that he needed looking after, but now that it had started to happen to him, he was not ecstatic about it. He sat down on one of the two chairs and Alice placed a huge plate of scrambled eggs on toast in front of him. Then she sat down opposite him and watched him as he began to eat.

'Now then, darling, don't play with it. Eat it all up like a good boy.'

Daniel glanced at her over the top of a forkful of scrambled egg and gave her a sickly smile.

'I'll eat as much as I can but I do not think I will be able to finish it all,' he said, shovelling the egg into his mouth.

'I don't want to see a scrap left on that plate in five minutes' time,' said Alice in a rather bullying tone of voice. 'By the way, darling,' she went on. 'Where is the laundry? I want to take your shirts to be washed.'

'The man calls on Fridays,' mumbled Daniel, swallowing another forkful of egg.

'But today is only Monday,' she said.

'So what?' he replied in a rather bored tone of voice. 'I've got plenty of shirts. If you take them somewhere else, it will balls everything up. I don't know the address of the laundry that calls, so why don't you wait till he comes?'

'It's no good having dirty clothes hanging about all the week,' said Alice flatly.

'Have it your way,' he said, becoming rather exasperated. 'I'm sorry, my angel, but I can't eat any more of this. How about a cup of coffee?' he asked, laying his knife and fork down on the plate.

'You're a naughty boy,' scolded Alice. 'I suppose you know it's very wicked to waste food.'

'Please stop it!' exclaimed Daniel. 'I can't force myself to eat it, can I? I mean to say you wouldn't want me to be sick all over the table, would you?'

'Don't be disgusting,' said Alice getting up from the table and pouring out the coffee.

Daniel took his coffee into the lounge and settled himself in an armchair whilst Alice clattered about in the kitchen as she did the washing-up. He picked up a magazine from the coffee table and flicked through the pages, but was unable to concentrate on any of the glossy photographs. The thought uppermost in his mind was, Was he doing the right thing? It was said that a leopard could not change its spots. Could he change his way of life as drastically as it was rapidly becoming obvious

he would have to, if and when he got married? The more he thought about it the more depressed he became. Then, when he had reached his lowest ebb, the phone rang.

'Hello,' said Daniel, raising the instrument to his ear.

'Hello, son, how are you?' shouted Scoop.

'All right,' replied Daniel dully.

'Well, you don't sound it. What's up?'

'Nothing.'

'What are you doing today?'

'Well, I've got to go to the bank.'

'That won't take you long. Do you want to have lunch afterwards?'

'I could do, but I don't know how long I shall be there.'

'Why not? You're only going to draw out a nice lot of money for the day's activities, aren't you?'

'Not exactly. You see the thing is I am thinking of going into business.'

'What business?'

'I don't know, just business,' snapped Daniel.

'All right, keep your hair on. Listen, why don't you buy a pub?'

'That's all I'm short of!'

'Being a publican is an honourable profession, isn't it?'

'I imagine so, for those who care for that sort of thing.'

'My, but we're snooty this morning. So what about lunch? I'll meet you in the Ritz, downstairs bar, O.K.?''

'I suppose so, but I might be late.'

'Don't worry, I'll wait there till you come.'

'Fine, see you then.' With that he rang off and at the same moment Alice came into the room.

'Who was that?' she asked.

'Scoop.'

'Darling, you're not going out drinking, are you?' she asked.

'Why?'

'Because I hate you when you're drunk,' she replied hotly.

'Do you now?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Now you listen to me, my darling. Scoop is one of my best friends, if I want to go out drinking with him I will go. It's not that I don't love you or anything like that, but a man must be free to do as he wishes. Do you understand?'

Alice looked as though she was going to burst into tears.

'Now please don't make a fuss, darling,' continued Daniel.

'But it's our first day back home. I thought we would spend it together.'

'But, darling, we haven't been out of each other's sight for three weeks. Why don't you ring up one of your girl friends and go out to lunch or something?' he suggested.

'I could do that, I suppose, but shall I see you later?'

'Don't be stupid, of course you will. I can't talk to you any more just now, I have to go to the bank,' said Daniel with an air of finality.

'All right, but don't get drunk, will you?'

'No, I won't. Now let's drop it, shall we?'

Alice came over to him and plonked herself down on his lap.

'Darling, I do love you,' she said, showering his face with kisses.

'And I love you too, my sweet. But we simply have to get used to each other's little ways, that's all.'

'You're quite right, darling. I'm sorry I'm so silly.' With that she got up and left the room, and Daniel sighed a great sigh of relief.

Mr Zurowski got up from behind his desk and crossed the room to greet Daniel as he was shown into his office.

'Mr Valler, how nice to see you! I hope you are well?' he said briskly shaking him by the hand.

'I'm fine, thank you, Mr Zurowski.'

'You enjoyed your holiday?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Good! Do have a seat, won't you?'

'Thank you,' said Daniel sitting down in the offered chair.

'Now then, what can I do for you?' asked Mr Zurowski offering Daniel a cigarette.

'No thank you,' said Daniel declining the cigarette. 'Though you may find this hard to believe, I am thinking of going into business.'

'Really?' exclaimed Mr Zurowski. 'And what kind of business did you have in mind, may I ask?'

'Well, you see, that's the thing. I don't really know. Perhaps you could advise me?'

'Quite, but of course such a step demands a great deal of thought, we must not rush into anything that we are going to regret at a later date, must we?'

'You're quite right, of course,' replied Daniel, seeing some sense in this nonsensical question. Going into business was obviously not going to be as easy as it had first appeared to him.

'What about trade?' asked Mr Zurowski who had a very shrewd eye for business.

'What sort of trade?'

'Well, there is the import-export business.'

'Sounds rather dull, what does one do?' asked Daniel.

'Well, one imports and one exports,' smiled Mr Zurowski who knew all about such things and was amazed that Daniel did not.

'Like what, for instance?'

'Raw rubber went up five points yesterday in the closing prices. I think it might be a good thing to get in on.'

Business was already becoming a great bore.

'I don't think I much care for the sound of it,' said Daniel without interest.

'Well, there is pig iron,' replied Mr Zurowski persuasively. 'Though I do not recommend it highly. The bottom has fallen out of it lately.'

'Has it really?' smiled Daniel.

'Yes, ever since the African states became independent,' Mr Zurowski replied rather sorrowfully.

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'Yes, most regrettable.' He glanced around his office fur-
tively as if to be sure that they could not be overheard.
'There is a tremendous boom in nylon just now,' he went on,
lowering his voice until it was barely a whisper.

'Get away,' laughed Daniel, beginning to enjoy the game.

'Yes, there is, but I am of course telling you in the strictest
confidence. If the word got out, there would be a fantastic run
on I.C.I. shares which would cripple the market.'

'I shan't tell a soul,' grinned Daniel.

'Guthrie and Leach went up by five points yesterday and
Sterne, Stewart and Monstanto reached an all-time record of
fifty-three and fourpence halfpenny a share which is an
increase of nineteen and twopence farthing in eight hours.'
Daniel could tell that Mr Zurowski was now in his element.
'Hawthorn and Hingley dropped seven and a half points but
I expect them to rise again within a day or two. Would you
be interested in buying Daggafontein? They are gilt-edged. At
an interest of four per cent they are a gift, Mr Valler, an
absolute gift. Godlin, Golden, Glob, Goodman, Grootviei,
Greencoat and Rand have fluctuated from four and eight-
pence, two and threepence, one and sevenpence halfpenny,
from sixty-seven and threepence halfpenny, thirty-seven and
six, twenty-four and ninepence in the space of five weeks. . . .'

Mr Zurowski got high on figures like a junky gets high on
morphine. He had long since forgotten why Daniel had come
to see him, indeed, he was not really aware that he was there
at all.

'Bekoh cons four million capital gains, seven and a quarter
per cent equals ninety-nine overall increase in the predicted
dividend per annum seven billion four hundred and thirty-
five thousand two hundred and eighty-four pounds one and
sixpence three farthings. Losses nil take away the number you

thought of leaving four per cent gold reserves. Calculating and real prop take over by December we should make a crust dear boy.'

Mr Zurowski was now so high that Daniel thought it unlikely that he would come down for a while, so getting up from his chair he sneaked unnoticed out of the door, leaving Mr Zurowski wildly scribbling figures on his ink blotter and making fantastically accurate calculations. It was not, Daniel realised as he left the austere building, going to be as easy as he had at first supposed to get into business.

When Daniel walked into the downstairs bar at the Ritz Scoop was predictably on his third whisky sour, also, somehow predictably, the barman had a phone message for him, requesting that he phone Miss Walker as soon as he arrived. Daniel thanked the barman for the message and ordered a Bloody Mary.

'Well, son, how was the trip?' asked Scoop, polishing off his drink and nodding to the barman, which indicated that he would have the same again.

'O.K.,' replied Daniel, noncommittally.

'You look disgustingly healthy. You haven't by some freak of curious occurrence been on the wagon, have you?'

'Not so as you would notice.' The barman laid two drinks in front of them on the bar. 'Cheers,' said Daniel raising the glass to his lip and sipping the red liquid which had the same consistency as congealed blood and was also about as appetising.

'Cheers,' exclaimed Scoop. 'Here's to you, and I am glad to see you. In spite of the disturbing news,' he added.

'What news?'

'The news of your betrothal, dear boy. It is true, isn't it?'

'Who told you?'

'You forget I am a journalist. There is nothing that does not get to my ears. More often than not, before it happens.'

'Yes, it is true,' sighed Daniel.

'I suppose you are in love?'

'Yes, I am, and why shouldn't I be?' snapped Daniel, detecting a note of despondency in Scoop's voice.

'Now then, Daniel, don't lose your temper, there's a good fellow. If I sound sad about it, it is only because I shall miss thrashing you at snooker and your company when drinking . . .'

' . . . But surely we shall still be able to go out together after I am married?' interrupted Daniel suddenly horrified at the prospect of finding himself tied down.

'We will not,' replied Scoop flatly.

'Why not?' exclaimed Daniel, pushing away the disgusting Bloody Mary and asking the barman to bring him a half-bottle of champagne.

'She will have you on the end of a ball and chain, my son. Mark my words.'

'Well, thanks for the congratulations,' replied Daniel miserably.

'I'm sorry to depress you, but I do feel that you should be well aware of what you are getting yourself into beforehand. Anyway let us forget it and have a few drinks.'

'That is charming, I must say,' said Daniel rapidly falling into the depths of despair. 'You thoroughly bring me down and then expect me to forget all about it. Do you think I am made of stone?'

'I know full well that you are a red-blooded boy, that is why I show such grave concern over this frightening turn of events,' said Scoop affectionately. 'You must realise that once you take this step you are lumbered for life, there is no going back on it. I hate to worry you but there it is.'

Daniel drained a glass of champagne and lit a cigarette.

'But what about love and having a home and kids?' he asked.

'That is all very well for the masses but not for you, son, not for you. I know you better than you know yourself. You simply wouldn't be able to stand the strains of family life.'

And I am not just thinking of you either, what about the girl? What's her name again?

'Alice.'

'Yes, Alice. What about her? If you truly love her you wouldn't want to be fucking up her life as well as your own now, would you?'

'Of course not.'

'Well, there you are then.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'I mean, me old sunshine, that if you marry this girl, errr . . .'

' . . . Alice!'

'Yes, of course, sorry, Alice, you will destroy her as well as yourself . . .'

' . . . I have never heard such a load of utter bullshit in my life,' interrupted Daniel. 'I don't care what you say. I am going to marry her and what is more we are going to be happy together. So there is no use in your trying to talk me out of it, my mind is made up.' At that moment the phone on the corner of the bar began to jangle. The barman went over and answered it.

'Hang on a minute, miss, I'll see if he is here,' he said, then placing his hand over the mouthpiece he turned to Daniel.

'Mr Valler; there's a young lady on the line for you, are you here?' he asked discreetly.

'Yes, of course I am, George,' said Daniel getting up from his bar stool and going around to the phone.

'Is that you, darling?' asked Alice in reply to Daniel's 'Hello?'

'Yes, my angel. What do you want?'

Scoop gave George the barman a hopeless look and pointed to his glass. George shrugged knowingly and took the glass away in order to replenish it.

'Darling,' gushed Alice, 'I've rung up one or two friends of mine but they weren't in so I have made some lunch at home. Would you like to come and have some?'

* 'I'd love to,' said Daniel not thinking before making the reply.

'That's marvellous,' exclaimed Alice. 'What time shall I expect you?'

'I don't know, what time is it now? Just a minute,' he glanced at his gold watch which read twenty-five to one. 'Shall we say half past one?' said Daniel.

'All right, darling, but you won't be any later, will you? I don't want the food to spoil.'

'No, I won't be late, darling.'

'Do you love me?'

'Of course I do.'

'And I love you more than I can ever say.'

'See you soon,' said Daniel blowing her a kiss and replacing the receiver.

'There you are!' laughed Scoop, who had overheard the conversation. 'She has started to get her hooks into you already.'

'Look, why don't you belt up? If I didn't want to go I wouldn't, so there,' replied Daniel defiantly.

'That's what you say.'

'Look, I don't know why you are having a go at me, I thought we were supposed to be friends?'

'Of course we are, mate,' said Scoop somewhat astonished that there should be any doubt about it.

'In that case, why don't you wish me luck, and be the best man at the wedding?'

'The funeral, you mean.'

'If you don't stop talking like that, I am leaving!' Daniel raised his voice and George gave him a reproving glance. 'I'm sorry, but I have had just about as much as I can take of your innuendoes.'

'I haven't made any innuendoes,' replied Scoop, looking rather hurt.

'Well, whatever it is you have been doing, I have had enough of it.'

'I have only been giving you some friendly advice. I felt that it was my duty as your friend to warn you of the pitfalls.'

'I don't need your advice!'

'Don't worry, I shall not waste any more breath on you.'

After this short exchange they both fell silent and stared into their glasses angrily.

'May I just say one thing?' mumbled Scoop after a minute or so.

'What is it?'

'Do you realise that she has already come between us, without even putting in an appearance?'

'Yes, I know,' sighed Daniel, 'and I'm sorry.'

'So am I,' said Scoop. 'Have a Strontium 90 cocktail before you go?'

When Daniel got home on the dot of one thirty he found the dining-room table set for two, and Alice in the kitchen preparing an *hors-d'œuvre* which was to be followed by grilled lamb chops with green butter, boiled potatoes and frozen peas. He noticed on the draining-board two bottles of wine, one Châteauneuf du Pape and the other Piesporter Goldtröpfchen 1961. Surely, thought Daniel, this must be the life.

'Hello, darling,' smiled Alice, brushing her hair from her face with the back of her greasy hand. 'Lunch won't be long, why don't you have a drink?'

'I'll open the wine,' he replied patting her on the backside. 'I don't think we will be able to drink them both so I'll only open the Châteauneuf du Pape to start with, all right?'

'Super, darling, now get out of my kitchen, there's a good boy.'

Daniel did not care much for this last remark but obediently left, taking the bottle of wine with him into the lounge, where he took a corkscrew from the drinks cupboard and rather violently wrenched the cork from the neck of the bottle. Scoop surely could not be right about her. He simply had to be wrong!

'Lunch is ready, darling!' called Alice some ten minutes later.

'I'll be right there,' said Daniel laying aside a copy of *The Times* that he had been glancing through.

Then getting to his feet he went into the dining-room where Alice had already served up the first course. The *hors-d'œuvre* consisting of green peppers, potato salad, anchovy, tuna fish, tomatoes, cold *ratatouille* and *sauce vinaigrette* was absolutely delicious.

'Oh it's nothing really,' said Alice when he had complimented her on it. 'Just you wait till you taste my rosti Swiss potato cakes,' she added proudly.

'I can't wait,' laughed Daniel and poured out the wine.

The lamb chops were as equally delicious as the *hors-d'œuvre*. Was it true, Daniel wondered, that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach? He was sure anyway that there was an element of truth in the old adage.

The meal over, Daniel went back into the sitting-room to read the accumulation of mail that had piled up whilst he had been away, most of which he recognised before opening as being either bills or invitations to cocktail parties. Alice went into the kitchen and did the washing-up. Daniel, having only a few friends and not one who had ever written him a letter, did not find his post very interesting. He made a mental note that one day he must sit down and write some cheques in payment of over a dozen bills. The invitations he threw into the wastepaper-basket. Then stretching himself out on the couch he tried once again to read *The Times*. The news was almost entirely bad throughout the entire world so turning to the back page and taking a pencil from his pocket he began to do the crossword puzzle.

'One across. County players join the school, eight letters. Hhmmm . . . Well, what's one down?' he muttered. 'Resolve to throw champion into river, six letters. That could be "decide" which could make one across "Downside". Two down. Time for some new interest, six letters, could be "winter".

Yes that's right, "Downside", "decide" and "winter". Now then, nine across. Materials for monument are not cheap, six letters, no eight letters, and the first one is "c" . . .

'Darling!' called Alice from the kitchen.

'What?' shouted Daniel somewhat cross at having his train of thought interrupted.

'What are you doing?' asked Alice.

'*The Times* crossword puzzle,' he replied in a bored tone of voice.

'I was wondering, err . . .'

'Wondering what?' called Daniel rather impatiently.

'It doesn't matter, I'll be in in a minute. I'll tell you then,' she said.

'Christ,' muttered Daniel and went back to his crossword. 'Now then,' he thought. 'Where was I? Ah yes, nine across, eight letters beginning with a "c", the third letter is "n" . . . Let's see three down. Place that needs repair in Yorkshire, six letters. What on earth can that be? Must try somewhere else. Twenty-two across. Irregular forces are put in the picture, six letters. Hhmmm . . . Could be "stroke" as in brush stroke. I don't know though, that doesn't sound right somehow, miles too obvious. What about seventeen down? "With my good biting I would have made them skip." King Lear, eight letters, that simply has to be "falchion". Yes, that's it, his sword. That might make twenty-two across "fresco". It's worth risking . . .' Alice came into the room and stroked his hair.

'What was it you wanted?' asked Daniel laying his paper aside after filling in the two words.

'I was just wondering if you would mind if we went over to the place where I was staying before we went away. To collect some of my stuff?'

'Do we have to do it today, darling?' asked Daniel in a rather hurt tone of voice.

'Not if you don't want to.'

'We'll do it in the morning, I promise.'

'All right, darling. Oh by the way, I rang Mummy and she

said that she is simply dying to meet you. I said that we would come down at the weekend. You will, won't you?"

'If I must, I must,' said Daniel absent-mindedly. 'Now leave me alone for a while, there's a good girl. I want to finish the crossword. It's so long since I have done one that I have lost my touch.'

'All right, my pet. My, but you're brainy.'

'Now run along, there's a good girl.' Alice smiled, kissed him on the cheek and left the room closing the door gently behind her.

Daniel looked at the closed door and smiled to himself and felt absolutely certain that everything that Scoop had said was completely untrue. Scoop was nothing but a miserable old bastard and that was all there was to it. Having thus assured himself he picked up his paper for the third time and went back to the crossword.

'Nineteen down. Wherein spirits appear to make a scene, six letters. Sounds mystic . . . could be "seance". Twenty-five across. Show resistance to project, two words, one with five letters, the other with three. Well, the fourth one is "n". Twenty down. It's brought in but I'm left at sea, six letters. I'll try "import", which makes the fourth and sixth letters of twenty-five across "n" and "o". It must be "standout".' Having now found eight of the solutions, the squares were beginning to fill up, and the remainder of the questions got easier as more were solved. Nine across was 'cenotaph'. Thump the piano for money. Thirteen down was 'pound notes'. Daniel was now gaining speed as well as headway. The answers began to come to him in quick succession. 'Tantamount', 'rural dean', 'Lyme Regis', 'ancestor', 'ironhorse' and 'Patagonia'. The thing about doing *The Times* crossword was that if you did it regularly you got to know the style of whichever man's turn it was to compile it. Twenty minutes later he had only two questions left to solve.

'Twenty-seven across. Seas tend to be stormy, it's agreed, eight letters.' The second one was 's', the fourth 'e', the

sixth 't' and the last 'd'. He knew that though the question was to do with the sea the answer was not. No sooner had he realised this than the solution came to him. He smiled as he filled in the missing letters, making the answer 'assented'. He had beaten the crafty old crossword man again. The final question was 'He may be simply dying to give satisfaction.' Daniel smiled again as he filled in the squares, 'duellist'. Cunning bugger, thought Daniel as he let the newspaper drop to the floor. Victorious once again, he was filled with a feeling of quiet satisfaction.

Chapter Nine

The following Friday afternoon after lunch at the Savoy Grill Daniel and Alice set off for Sussex in the E-type. Alice's parents lived in the tiny village of Hadlow which was but a dot on the A.A. map. Daniel had tried to put off going right up until the last minute, but Alice was dead set on him meeting her family, and would not take 'no' for an answer. So in order not to upset her and to avoid argument he had finally relented.

It was a fine day, so Daniel had put the hood down on the car and was roaring along the main arterial road to Sussex at ninety miles an hour, occasionally topping the hundred mark on the straight. The wild breeze whipping around their ears exhilarated them and for a time Daniel forgot about the people that he was going to meet at the end of the journey. Alice lay back in her seat with her hair streaming behind her. Now and then she looked up at Daniel and smiled. He winked at her as he pressed his foot further down on the accelerator, sending the car hurtling along the silver road with the speed of a bullet. She squeezed his thigh as the needle on the speedometer passed the hundred and twenty miles an hour mark; her nails biting into his flesh were painful but he was too preoccupied with controlling the car to prevent her from doing it. Glancing at the dashboard he noticed that he would soon be in need of some petrol. He eased his foot off the accelerator.

'What are you stopping for?' yelled Alice trying to make her voice heard over the roar of the engine.

'I'm not stopping!' Daniel shouted back. 'We are still doing eighty. Keep your eyes open for a petrol station, we are getting a bit low.'

'O.K.!' replied Alice and let go of his thigh, much to his relief.

A couple of miles further on Daniel spotted a petrol station and slowed down to fifteen miles an hour. flicked the indicator to the right and swung the car onto the ramp and came to a halt next to the pump marked 'Super'. Whilst a pretty female attendant wearing an ultra-brief bikini filled the tank up, Daniel glanced at the A.A. road map to see how much further they had to go.

'I know the way,' volunteered Alice.

'I am sure you do,' said Daniel, 'but you don't mind if I look for myself, do you?'

It had come to him again why they were making the journey. From the A.A. map he estimated that they had roughly twenty more miles to travel then they would have to make a right turn off the main road and Hadlow was another seven miles further on, along winding country lanes. Having paid the attendant who gave Daniel a flashing smile in return for the half a crown tip he gave her, they set off again. He did not drive as fast now and wished that he had not done so before, for he was in no hurry to meet these rumbustious country folk, for such he had firmly convinced himself they would be.

They had been driving down the twisting lanes for some twenty-five minutes when Alice suddenly exclaimed:

'Turn down the next opening on the right, darling! Our house is at the end of the drive.'

Daniel nodded and swung into the driveway and saw at the end of it a smallish cottage with two floors and a thatched roof. In front of it was an oval lawn with grass mown as even as a billiard table. There were also flowerbeds ablaze with rose bushes. It was all as pretty as a picture, but Daniel's heart sank as the front door opened and an ample middle-aged woman came out to greet them.

'Mummy, darling!' shrieked Alice as Daniel came to a slithering halt on the gravel path outside the house. She leapt

out of the car and dashed into the woman's arms and kissed her with the affection of a mongrel bitch whose master has been away for a week. Daniel slowly pulled off his suède motoring gloves and clambered out of the car as a tweedy middle-aged man with a bald head came out of the house. Alice immediately transferred her affections to him.

'Daddy angel, how marvellous you are looking!' she shrieked kissing him all over his ruddy face. Daniel thought he looked dreadful, but blood, he remembered, was said to be thicker than water.

The woman approached Daniel with a soft gooey smile spread all over her face; for one frightening moment he thought that she was going to clasp him to her bosom, but was relieved when she held out her hand and said:

'You must be Daniel Valler.' He took her hand and shook it lightly.

'How do you do, Mrs Walker?' he mumbled. 'Alice has told me so much about you.' That was the first lie. Mr Walker disentangled himself from Alice's embrace and advanced on Daniel, grabbing his hand and wringing it so hard that the knuckles cracked like broken twigs.

'How do you do, my boy?' he bellowed.

'Pleased to meet you, sir,' Daniel replied, wincing from the pressure on his fingers. Mr Walker let go of his hand which Daniel discreetly massaged behind his back with his other hand.

'Did you have a good trip down?' asked Alice's mother.

'Fine, thanks,' smiled Daniel.

'That new London road cuts half an hour off the travelling time,' remarked Mr Walker. 'About time, too, by God,' he added. 'Damn' labour government never gets anything done . . .'

'Now then, Charles,' interrupted Mrs Walker, 'I'm sure Daniel does not want to discuss politics the moment he has arrived.'

'Damn' lot of rotters. I know what I would do if I had my

way . . .’ said Mr Walker but did not volunteer what that might be.

‘Let’s go into the house and have tea,’ said Mrs Walker and led the way through the front door.

The interior of the house was exactly what Daniel had expected it to be like, flowered wallpaper, chintz curtains, wheel-back chairs, potted plants and the oak beams in the ceilings brought out with black paint. There were polished horse brasses here and there, and knick-knacks wherever you looked. In the hall there was a grandfather clock, and a few prints of people whom Daniel recognised as ancestors, but of which side of the family he was not sure.

‘Do you want to go anywhere?’ asked Mrs Walker glancing in Daniel’s direction.

‘I beg your pardon?’ asked Daniel not understanding for a moment what she could mean.

‘The bathroom,’ she beamed.

‘My God,’ he thought. ‘What on earth am I doing here?’

‘No thank you,’ he replied flatly, attempting to return her smile but only managing a rather unpleasant leer.

‘Well, it’s the first door on the right at the top of the stairs, when you need it,’ she went on.

‘Thank you so much,’ he said in a rather sarcastic tone of voice.

Mrs Walker smiled again and then went off to the kitchen to toast the muffins and take the scones out of the oven, whilst Mr Walker led the way into the parlour.

‘Have a seat, my boy,’ he said. ‘Tea will be along soon.’

‘Thank you,’ replied Daniel, and sat in an armchair.

Charles Walker was the kind of person that Daniel simply loathed. He was a bigot, waster, seedy and so hearty that it made one feel quite sick. Though Daniel was no paragon of virtue himself he had some rather undefinable scruples. Mr Walker, who called himself a gentleman farmer, had been a captain in a rather undistinguished regiment during the war,

but to hear him talk one would have thought that he had been a brigadier-general. He had a weak chin and shifty eyes, and Daniel had a burning desire to insult him ruthlessly. With a superhuman effort he managed to curb the delicious impulse. Every word that Mr Walker uttered left him exposed to a rapid comeback, which could have been deftly dealt by even a novice in the art of repartee. Daniel squirmed as he carried on alarmingly about his heroic exploits during the D-Day landings.

Alice was well aware of Daniel's discomfort and made an effort to change the subject by suggesting that she show Daniel his room. Somewhat reluctantly her father agreed and offered to help get the suitcases in from the car.

'No, thanks, I will be able to manage,' exclaimed Daniel hurriedly, got to his feet and made his escape from the room with Alice skipping behind him.

'You mustn't mind Daddy, darling,' said Alice as she helped Daniel take the cases from the boot of the car. 'He's very nice once you get to know him,' she added blowing him a kiss.

'Is he?' murmured Daniel.

'I know he goes on a bit, but it's just that he does not meet many strangers. They are both rather lonely really.'

'Are they?' Daniel murmured, heading back to the house carrying a suitcase in either hand.

'Now, darling, please be nice.'

'I am being nice!'

'They will be terribly upset if they think you don't like them.'

'I'm mad about them!'

'Are you really?'

'Yes I am. Now let's drop it, shall we?'

'You're not mad about them at all,' she pouted.

'I have already told you that I am, haven't I?'

'Well, you don't have to snap my head off, do you?'

By this time they had reached the front door. Alice led the

way up the narrow staircase in silence, her tight little behind bouncing angrily from side to side.

'This will be your room, darling,' she said throwing open a door at the end of the landing and going into the room. 'My room is opposite. I shall be able to pay you a little visit when they are asleep,' she giggled coily.

'That will be nice,' said Daniel without enthusiasm.

'Darling, please don't be such a misery,' she begged.

'You're quite right, my angel,' said Daniel after giving the matter a little thought. 'There is no point in making things worse than they are. We'll just have to make the best of a bad job.'

'That's not very kind, is it?' she asked sadly.

'You know what I mean,' replied Daniel patting her on the cheek. 'Come on, let's go downstairs again.'

'Don't you want to kiss me, darling?' she asked expectantly, puckering her lips.

'Any time,' laughed Daniel taking her in his arms and kissing her passionately, his right hand slipping between her silken thighs.

'Not now. Tea will be ready in a minute,' she breathed, kissing the lobe of his ear.

'Come on you two, tea is ready,' called Mrs Walker as if on cue.

'I fancy you,' said Daniel, squeezing her closer to him.

'I should think so, too,' she replied, disentangling herself from his embrace.

Daniel thought the tea absolutely delicious. Mrs Walker was a wonderful cook and he was sure that it must have been she who had taught Alice the culinary arts. He could not help thinking that it was going to be nice to have a wife who was a good cook as well as being good in bed. It was rare that the two went hand in hand.

There were hot muffins and scones, spread thickly with country butter. Brown bread and home-made raspberry jam and fruit cake. Mrs Walker poured tea from the willow-pattern

teapot into the matching cups, and asked Daniel if he took sugar and milk. He actually preferred lemon in his tea but thought it better to have milk and sugar the same as everyone else, for fear that his tastes might appear too exotic in these rural surroundings. Apart from occasional visits to Fortnum's Daniel hardly ever took tea, except in the mornings. And even on his visits to that august emporium there was usually an ulterior motive, which was without fail a rendezvous with an afternoon lover. They invariably had little time to waste on sipping tea, as they wished to get him between the sheets with all speed and get home to their children before their husbands returned home from their many varying places of work.

'Would you like another scone?' asked Mrs Walker offering Daniel the plate.

'No, thank you,' smiled Daniel politely, having already had three.

'You must,' she insisted. 'Look, there are only two left and I don't want them to go to waste.'

'Really I couldn't . . .' pleaded Daniel.

'A piece of fruit cake then?'

'Just a small piece then,' said Daniel.

Mrs. Walker's idea of a small piece was huge, certainly enough for four people.

'I really do not think that I will be able to eat all that,' said Daniel, a look of anguish creeping over his face.

'You must, I baked it specially for you. Have some more tea?'

Daniel passed his cup to Mrs Walker who expertly filled it and shovelled two spoonfuls of sugar into it.

'Pass that back to Daniel, dear,' she said handing the cup to Alice.

During tea Charles Walker bemoaned the fact that the price of cabbage had taken a nose dive. He had two fields of it three miles the other side of Hadlow.

'If the price of cabbage falls any lower I will not break even,' he said with feeling, addressing the remark to Daniel,

who, not being able to think of a scintillating reply, filled his mouth with cake and simply nodded his head gravely. 'It's the damn' labour government!' he blustered. 'I don't trust them, by God. Give me the conservatives every time. You know where you are with them. I'll tell you . . .'

'Now, dear,' said Mrs Walker gently.

Daniel looked at Mr Walker and wondered if he was aware of how foolish he appeared to other people. Foolish was a mild word, idiotic would be a better one. He was obviously a staunch member of the dying imperialist type of Englishman, who considered it entirely enough to simply have been born English. He demanded respect from the younger generation for no other reason than that he was older than they. He rarely got it, except from the local farm boys, who through ignorance knew no better than to be subservient. He despised the working classes, and thought that they were being treated far too leniently by their employers. He had a string of out-dated maxims to which he adhered to the point of insanity: The country is going to the dogs, If I had my way I would horsewhip the lot of them, Negroes should be hanged if they so much as glanced in the direction of a white girl, Catholics and Jews are not to be dealt with or trusted, The Royal Family are divine, Women are inferior and should be flogged into obedience, The country is the only civilised place to live, and so on. He was conservative to the roots of his toe-nails, verging almost, if not in fact, upon fascism. As Daniel listened to him expounding his views on Queen and Country he could not help but compare him with Hitler or Mussolini, both of whom he would have got on with like a house on fire.

After tea Mrs Walker suggested that Alice show Daniel around the garden whilst she did the washing-up. Daniel was delighted with the suggestion for he had had just about as much as he could take of Mr Walker's incessant grumblings.

'All people seem to be interested in these days is T.V. sets and refrigerators!' exploded Mr Walker as Daniel got to his feet.

'Quite,' replied Daniel absent-mindedly.

'The British people have no longer got any sense of responsibility!' he bellowed, suddenly beginning to pick his nose.

'Certainly,' said Daniel who was now completely lost for words.

Alice came to his rescue by taking hold of his hand and dragging him from the room.

'We'll go out and have one later, my boy,' said Mr Walker as the couple disappeared out of the door.

Daniel and Alice walked through the garden hand in hand and sat on a wooden seat under an oak tree out of sight of the house. In the tree was a rookery, and for a few minutes they sat in silence listening to the sinister 'Caw caw! Caw caw! Caw caw!' of the large black birds as they swooped and argued in the evening sunshine.

'What do you think of them?' asked Alice hesitantly.

'They're all right, I suppose.'

'You don't like them, do you?'

'I didn't say so, did I?'

'I can tell.'

'I didn't think that I had made it obvious.'

'You didn't, but I can tell just the same.'

'How?'

'You were too polite.'

'Well, I like that, I must say.'

'They're all right really, you know.'

'Sure they are.'

'Caw caw caw!' went a rook sitting on a bough above Daniel's head and dropped a turd which just missed his head by an inch and splattered on the toecap of his highly polished left shoe.

'That's charming, I must say,' remarked Daniel glaring at the bird, who returned the look coldly.

'Darling,' said Alice nestling close to him. 'Shall we set a date for the wedding?'

'If you like.'

'When?'

'You say.'

'What month is it?'

'September.'

'What about November?'

'Darling, that would be marvellous. By the way, have you told your mother and father about it yet?'

'Well, sort of, but not really.'

'What on earth does that mean?'

'Well, my sweet, you know what Daddy is like. He expects it to come from you,' she said gently kissing his hand.

'My God, have I got to ask for your hand?'

'You love me, don't you?'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Won't you speak to him, just to please me?'

'But that sort of thing is so dated, I'd feel so stupid saying "I love your daughter, sir, and wish to ask for her hand in marriage." For Christ sake who lives like that any more?'

'I think it's nice.'

'Of course, you would,' said Daniel rather sharply, rapidly becoming exasperated with the whole idea and wishing that he had not come.

'You'll have a good chance of asking him when he takes you to the pub this evening. Or after dinner, perhaps.'

'It's nonsense!'

'You'll do it, it will be easy, just you wait.'

'Can't we just get married without all the fuss?'

'Father expects it,' said Alice flatly.

He could tell by the tone of her voice that this was final. He would have to ask the silly old fool for his daughter's hand; the idea was perfectly horrid.

That evening Charles Walker took Daniel to the local country club for a drink, and introduced him to a few of his cronies, who with the exception of a rather horsey young girl, the daughter of the County Sheriff, were taken from the same

mould as Mr Walker. The girl's name was Sybil, and she invited Daniel to play tennis at the club the following morning. Daniel said that he would be delighted though he hadn't brought any clothes or rackets.

'Don't worry about that, old boy!' she exclaimed heartily, smashing him on the back. 'We'll soon fix you up.'

During the evening Daniel looked for an opportunity to pop the question to the old man, but somewhat lacking in courage and also inclination he did not manage to broach the subject. So he let it fall from his mind, hoping that an opportunity would arise at some other time during the weekend, though really fully realising that it would not. The outing went well, and Daniel with a superhuman effort managed not to disgrace himself though there was one nasty moment when he asked the barman for a packet of Balkan Sobranie, an unheard-of brand of cigarettes in these parts. Though the men raised their eyebrows, Sybil thought it an exotic request, and not having had a man lately, began to set her sights at him. He tried to show no interest in her, but being for ever flattered by attention he could not resist flirting with her in a mild sort of way.

'I think we should be getting home,' said Mr Walker after a couple of hours. 'The missus will have the dinner ready and will make our lives hell if we are late.' For some reason the men thought this remark funny and let out a roar of raucous laughter. 'Come along, lad, we don't want to get into any ructions, do we?' Daniel smiled weakly and followed him out of the door.

'You won't forget tomorrow, will you?' called Sybil fluttering her eyelashes in a ridiculous fashion.

'No, I won't forget,' Daniel replied with a wave of his hand.

The dinner was as equally delicious as the tea had been. The meal consisted of plain and simple roast meat, potatoes and some of that cabbage, the price of which had taken a nose dive. They had even gone to the vast lengths of getting a couple of bottles in, this being something that they were far too frugal to do unless they had house guests. It was a young claret,

Pomerol, not more than three or four years old Daniel observed, though he did not see the label.

During the meal the family made small talk about local affairs such as the church fête and the partridge shoot on the Sheriff's estate the following week.

'Tell me, Daniel,' asked Mrs Walker innocently during a lull in the conversation. 'What do you do for a living?'

'As a matter of fact, I am just going to go into business,' he replied after giving the question a little thought.

'How interesting! What kind of business?'

'Err . . . yes, well, you see the thing is I have put the matter in the hands of my bank manager,' he said knowing full well that every eye in the room was upon him.

'Top secret, eh?' asked Mr Walker somewhat suspiciously.

'Not really, I am just not sure what the line is going to be,' said Daniel knowing too that he was losing ground.

'In the city?' asked Mr Walker.

'Oh yes, I should think it will most definitely be in the city.'

'I see.'

'As a matter of fact, my father was in the city,' volunteered Daniel. He knew that he had said the wrong thing. The questions would now come thick and fast.

'What did he do?' ordered Mr Walker, for it certainly was no question.

'As a matter of fact, I never did find out,' laughed Daniel, attempting to be blasé but failing miserably. 'He was simply in business, you know a businessman . . .'

With that he trailed off for he was well aware that if he continued he would find himself deep in the quagmire. He picked up his glass and took a gulp from it.

'That covers a multitude of sins,' laughed Mr Walker in a most unfriendly manner.

'I imagine it does,' said Daniel making yet another super-human effort, this time to compose himself. 'But whatever it was, that he did; he was a genius at it and became very

wealthy.' Mr Walker hated the *nouveau riche* with a great loathing that consumed his very soul.

'He was a self-made man then?' he asked in disgust.

'You could say that,' smiled Daniel fully realising that it was now he who had the advantage.

'Admirable,' said Mr Walker, in a patronising tone of voice.

'He did his best,' replied Daniel modestly.

'By God, there are not many men of mettle about these days,' Mr Walker said, completely unable to keep the insulting tone out of his voice.

'Darling, would you like some trifle?' asked Alice, noticing that Daniel was beginning to get rankled.

'That would be nice, I haven't had any since I was a child,' replied Daniel, his eyes blazing.

Mrs Walker also noticed that a nasty atmosphere was descending and asked her husband how the plans for the Hunt Ball were coming along. He was on the committee and made most of the decisions with regard to the invitations. This allowed him to give vent to his psychopathic tendencies or whatever they were. In any event he only sent invitations to those people in the county whom he considered to have blue blood and high status. This often caused much upset for he would sometimes invite a husband without his wife or the wife without her husband, as a result neither would turn up. Though people sometimes complained of his scandalous behaviour they never did it officially, for to have done so would have offended the Sheriff of the County on whose recommendation he had been elected to the committee in the first place. To incur the displeasure of the Sheriff was to be ostracised. An offender might just as well move out of the county, for his neighbours would not touch him with a barge pole for fear of getting the same treatment themselves.

'We have a meeting next week,' said Mr Walker with relish. 'I know some people who are going to get a bit of a shock, I can tell you that.'

Alice put a dish of trifle in front of Daniel and gave him a

reassuring smile. But she need not have troubled herself for his anger had now left him, indeed he was now delighted with himself at being able to enrage the stupid old man.

'Would you care for a glass of port?' asked Mr Walker when the meal was over.

'Thank you,' said Daniel.

'Capital. My father laid a pipe down for me when I was born. There were fifty-six dozen bottles to begin with, but there are now only three hundred bottles. My father drank as much of it as he could before he died. I now only have it on special occasions.'

'It that so?' said Daniel not really caring how many bottles he had or hadn't got.

'Shall we go to my study? We will be more comfortable there. My wife will bring us coffee.'

Daniel got up and reluctantly followed him out of the room, catching Alice's eye as he went. There was pleading in his gaze that he hoped she would read as 'Come and save me as soon as you can.'

The study was small and rather musty, the walls were lined with leather-bound books of no value, the leather chairs were worn and comfortable. The desk was neat and tidy with two trays for answered and unanswered letters on it, marked 'in' and 'out'. Daniel had got the impression from the beginning that the house was run like an army post and somehow or other the 'in' and 'out' trays clinched it in his mind.

Mr Walker took a decanter of port and two glasses from a cabinet and laid them on the desk.

'Take a pew, old chap, we might as well make ourselves comfortable, what?' he said, pouring some port into each of the glasses.

'Thank you,' said Daniel, plonking himself down in one of the armchairs so heavily that the chair let out a great sigh as the air escaped from the leather upholstery. Mr Walker sat in the other chair after handing Daniel one of the glasses.

'You know,' he began, 'this is my favourite room in the house.' Daniel nodded. 'Yes, it's the only place I can get a bit of peace and quiet without having those fussing women clucking over me the whole time.'

'It's nice to have a place where one can get away,' said Daniel and meant it. 'Cheers.' He raised his glass.

'To the regiment,' replied Mr Walker.

'Err . . . yes, to the regiment,' answered Daniel not really quite knowing what it was that he was drinking to.

'It's just a little fad of mine,' explained the old man. 'Whenever I have a glass of port in here I always drink to the regiment.'

'Ah yes, that explains it,' said Daniel repeating the toast and beginning to feel rather foolish.

'Carry on smoking,' mumbled Mr Walker sinking even deeper into the nostalgia of times long past.

Somehow Daniel could not help feeling a little sorry for him, the brigadier that never was, commanding the battalion that never existed. Daniel took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, offered one to Mr Walker who declined, lit one himself and sat back waiting for the old war horse to embark on yet another bitter assault on the Normandy beaches.

'Well, young man, as you have not had the goodness to vouchsafe the information, perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me now what your intentions are with regard to my daughter?'

Daniel was so surprised by the question that he almost sprang to attention and shouted 'Honourable, sir!' But instead he smiled, took a sip from his port, and said 'I wish to marry her, sir.'

'I see. May I ask your qualifications?'

'I am in love with her, sir.'

'What's that?!'

'I am in love with her.'

'Rubbish! Love, who ever heard of such a thing?'

'It is true, sir.'

'Love is what you have with whores in the bazaar, lad. The foundations for marriage need to be made of sterner stuff.'

'I think it is enough.'

'You may, but I tell you that it is not. Have another glass of port?'

'Thank you.'

'Now then, let me tell you. I have been married for twenty-seven years. I met the wife when she was still a schoolgirl. My father knew her family well. It was the accepted thing that we would get married some day and we did.'

'We cannot all be alike, sir.'

'And why not, may I ask?'

'Do you think that being in love is weak?' Daniel had asked the question without realising what he was saying.

'I think it is unwise.' He began to flush. 'It is ridiculous to be blinded by infatuation. I have seen many men ruined by it.'

'I love her and wish to marry her, will you give your consent?' asked Daniel, completely bored by the inane conversation.

'How dare you ask me that, boy!' he bellowed.

The old man was now beside himself with fury. For one dreadful moment Daniel thought the captain was going to strike him.

'I will never give my consent, and if you marry her against my wishes I will cut her off without a penny . . .'

' . . . I have plenty of money!' interrupted Daniel, also beginning to lose his temper.

'Neither of you will set foot in this house again!'

'I cannot say that I care for your house, anyway.'

'Don't you give me any of your impudence, boy!'

In the dining-room, where Alice and her mother were clearing the table, they could hear the two men yelling at each other.

'Good God, whatever can be going on?' asked Mrs Walker who was rather given to the vapours when roused.

'I rather think Daniel is asking for my hand in marriage,' smiled Alice.

'That's rather rash of him, don't you think, dear?' said Mrs Walker in a quavery little voice.

'Well, it had to come sometime, Mother.'

'I suppose so, but you know what your father is like when he loses his temper.'

'If he wants to lose his temper, he will just have to do it. I mean to say we have our lives to live, haven't we?'

'Yes, dear, of course, but . . .'

'There are no "buts" about it, Mother. We are to be married and that is all there is to it.'

'When?'

'November.'

'Your mind is made up?'

'Yes.'

Just at that moment the study door burst open and Mr Walker came charging out.

'What is it, dear?' asked Mrs Walker.

'What is it? Don't tell me you didn't hear every word,' then turning on Alice he said, 'Are you going to go ahead with this madness?'

'I don't think it is madness, Father.'

'You don't, eh?'

'No.'

'Well, we'll see about that.'

'There is nothing you can do about it, I am over twenty-one.'

'Is that so?'

'Daddy, darling, why don't you give us a chance? Don't you want me to be happy?'

'Bah!'

Daniel stood at the dining-room door with a faintly amused expression on his face. For a time the three members of the family did not notice him, for they were far too preoccupied with their squabble. Daniel was a little surprised but filled

with admiration at the way Alice was standing up to her father. Mrs Walker, who had at first tried to calm them, was now reduced to tears and had given up the fight.

'If you go off with that scapegrace, you are no longer my daughter!' shouted Mr Walker.

Daniel found the whole scene most entertaining, it reminded him of a Victorian melodrama, indeed it was a Victorian melodrama. After a while he felt that he could serve no useful purpose by remaining where he was so he went upstairs, brushed his teeth in the bathroom and went to bed. He lay on his back for a full hour listening to the battle raging downstairs. Now and then there would be a lull, only to be broken moments later by a shrill scream or a roar of fury. At last Daniel heard Mr Walker bellow:

'We will talk about this again in the morning!' By the closeness of his voice Daniel thought that he must be mounting the stairs. 'No daughter of mine is going to marry a ne'er-do-well scoundrel whilst I am the master of this house, and that is my final word! My God, we do not even know anything of his family background!' With that a door slammed and then silence. Daniel smiled and switched out the bedside lamp.

He had been asleep about four hours when Alice, a ghostly figure in her white nightdress, floated along the landing and silently turned the door knob of his door and disappeared inside closing it softly behind her.

'Darling,' she whispered as she crossed the room to the bed. 'Darling!'

Daniel grunted, moved slightly but did not wake. She went to the window and pulled the curtains gently apart, then sat on the bed looking down at his sleeping face. The moonlight shone through the window, playing on his features, and flattering him slightly, making him look even more handsome than she thought him to be.

'Darling, I do love you,' she whispered leaning over and kissing him lightly on the lips. He snuffled but still did not wake up. 'Darling, you are the most beautiful man I have ever

seen in my life,' she whispered taking his head in her hands and lifting it onto her lap. 'We will be married, you'll see, and live happily ever after like princes in fairy tales.'

For ten minutes she sat in the same position stroking his hair, before she began to feel a little chilly and cramped. Gently she raised his head again and slipped out from under him, then pulling back the covers slid into the bed next to him, snuggling up against him for warmth. Though he was still asleep Daniel's arms went around her and drew her towards him. She was so happy, her heart so full of love for him that she thought that at any moment she would burst. His hair smelt of fresh shampoo and his skin of biscuits.

'Oh my darling,' she whispered snuggling her nose into the softness of his neck between his shoulder and chin.

Slowly Daniel began to wake up. Suddenly his eyes opened wide and he looked around the room wildly, wondering where on earth he was.

'It's all right, darling, I am here,' said Alice. Daniel relaxed and held her close to him.

'Hello,' he said.

'Hello, darling,' she replied.

'What happened?' he asked, suddenly remembering the violent scene of the night before.

'Don't let's talk about it now, everything will be all right. Kiss me, darling... ' Their lips met in a gentle caress, the warmth and purity of which gave Daniel a swift erection. She felt it stab into her belly and flicked her tongue in and out of his mouth, her hand massaging his throbbing member simultaneously. Daniel whipped the bedclothes back and getting to his knees slowly raised her nightie until it was above her navel, then gently he ran his tongue over her belly and thighs. Reverently he kissed the lips between her legs as though they might have been a child's, until she let out an ecstatic shriek of joy.

'Fuck me, darling, fuck me,' she groaned, stroking his head as his mouth and tongue ground into her.

Turning her over he went into her dog fashion, belly to bum. She was now so wet that making love to her was like waving his arm about in a warm room. At last he came inside her with three great jerks and a delicious sensation at the base of his spine. Then he collapsed on top of her, blowing like a race-horse that had just run five furlongs.

'Darling,' he whispered when he had caught his breath, 'it has never been like this before. I feel as though I have been reborn . . .'

' . . . I know, darling,' she interrupted, pressing two fingers to his lips to prevent him from saying more. 'I feel the same. I had never had a man until I met you.'

'Never?' said Daniel behind her fingers.

'Never, just boys.'

Daniel sank into a deep sleep and when he awoke it was morning and Alice had gone.

Though the atmosphere over breakfast was by no means sympathetic it was not as hostile as Daniel had expected it to be. Mr Walker bid him a brisk good morning as he entered the room and Mrs Walker asked him if he would prefer eggs or kippers. Alice just sat there, her elbows on the table and her face cupped in her hands, ogling him brazenly with so much love in her eyes that he began to turn red in the face.

'Alice, dear, eat your eggs before they get cold,' said Mrs Walker well aware of what was going on between them.

'What?' asked Alice without taking her eyes off Daniel.

'Eat your eggs.'

'All right, after breakfast, Mummy,' she was not in this world at all.

Mr Walker glanced sharply at her and was about to say something but thought better of it and went back to reading his morning paper, which he had propped up in front of him on the table.

The rest of the weekend went off without incident. For most of the time Mr Walker locked himself in his study, only emerging at meal times. Not wishing to become involved and only

having eyes for Alice, Daniel did not keep his tennis date with Sybil, for he was quite certain that to have done so would have been fatal. He took Alice for drives around the countryside in the E-type, stopping here and there to lie together on the banks of a stream or tumble behind a haystack. They were blissfully happy and Daniel found her more radiant every time he looked at her. He felt complete and contented, his lifelong search was now over, he had found what he had been looking for and was happy. Whatever happened in the future these moments could never be taken from him. This was what life was about, he felt sure of that. It was a love song come true!

All too soon it was Sunday evening, and Daniel felt that it was time that they headed back to town. He rather dreaded going back to London, for though he was full of good intentions about the future, he knew only too well that he would need all his strength when it came to putting any of his 'original intentions' to the test. He had had so many 'original intentions' he had long since lost count of how many. But this time he felt that he would succeed. Failure would mean ruin and even death. He could not live without Alice, but he also knew that he could not live with her unless he changed his way of life beyond all recognition. Love, he was sure, would find a way.

As they were about to leave, Mr Walker invited Daniel into his study for a farewell drink. Daniel followed him into the room with his heart in his mouth and prepared himself for a final volley of abuse. But to his complete amazement Mr Walker smiled at him and said:

'I have been talking things over with my wife, and have decided that . . . err . . . well, that is to say, it is obvious to me that Alice is very happy and determined to remain with you in spite of all opposition. So I have decided that I will not stand in your way.' Daniel was about to speak. 'Now please don't interrupt me, Daniel. You may think I am an old foggy and I suppose that in many ways I am, but I have my principles and am used to being obeyed. Though it may not appear

so, I am very fond of my daughter and her happiness comes first, so if it is you that she wants then she must have you . . .’

Daniel suddenly felt sorry for the phoney old war horse. He had lost the battle and looked very old and worn out. The defeat had put years on him and he was tired.

‘I promise you, sir, that I will make her happy and always take care of her,’ said Daniel smiling warmly.

‘I’m sure you will, Daniel, I’m sure you will. You must come down again as soon as you can.’

‘Yes, sir, I will.’ With that they shook hands firmly and parted company.

Daniel told Alice about the interview as they drove back to town.

‘I know,’ she smiled.

‘What do you mean, you know?’

‘Daddy came to my room last night and we talked it over.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Because I thought it would be better if he told you himself.’

‘I see,’ replied Daniel with a grin, and pressed his foot down on the accelerator.

Chapter Ten

During the days following the weekend in the country Daniel became more and more subdued and thoughtful. He began to have doubts. He began to lose confidence in his ability to carry out a single one of these shining new resolutions. The situation became more and more absurd the more thought he gave it. How on earth, he wondered, had he got himself into such a predicament? His meditations were not helped by having Alice about the place morning, noon and night. Having got him, she was not going to give him a moment's peace.

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him every ten minutes and demanded cuddles as regularly as a baby screams for its mother's milk. She cooked for him, and washed his socks. And the more morose he became the more ardent she became. It was as though she was trying to save him from drowning in his inadequacy to face up to the conflict raging within his soul. But the more she kissed him the more troubled he became, until by the end of the week he had tortured himself almost to distraction. The situation had become absolutely hopeless and he felt that he would soon go mad. There was only one logical thing to do and that was to escape without delay.

He was naked in a cathedral, standing in front of the altar. There was a garland of roses about his neck and the thorns jabbed into his flesh. Alice stood beside him wearing a snow-white satin wedding dress. Her father and mother were also in attendance, he wearing the uniform of a general and she wearing an extravagant powdered wig and looking for all the world like Marie Antoinette. Suddenly the bishop ap-

peared before them, the sunlight poured through the stained-glass window depicting the resurrection and danced upon the golden threads woven into his crimson robes. Without warning he revealed his godhead to the assembled congregation but it was a death's-head not of divine deity. A serpent squirmed from beneath the hem of his surplice and bared its fangs at Daniel. But Alice subdued it with a smile, making it cringe into a corner with fear in its eyes.

The bishop began the service in scurrilous fashion, chanting the formal summary of Christian doctrine, backed by a jazz combo:

'I believe in anti-Semitism, the lynching of negroes, the hanging of murderers and the use of French letters.' The creed came to an end with the congregation yelling, 'Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!'

Bishop: Let us blaspheme.

The congregation, with the exception of Daniel and Alice, fall to their knees.

The bishop turns and kneels facing the altar.

Bishop: Why do coloured men wear baggy trousers?

Congregation: Because they're kneegrows!

Bishop: What does the man in the sweet shop weigh?

Congregation: Sweets!

Bishop: What happens when a girl wears cotton stockings?

Congregation: Nothing!

The bishop stands up and faces Daniel and Alice.

Bishop: Was he on his knees when he proposed to you?

Alice: No, I was on them.

Bishop: Are there any here present who fancy either of these two wantons? Speak now or from henceforth hold your water.

The curate steps forward and lifts Alice's skirt above her head revealing her black silk underwear for all to see.

Bishop, to Daniel: Well, my lad, do you take these stocking tops from this day forward to lust after and stroke, through impotency and insatiability, for orgasm or frus-

tration, in clap or in crabs, forsaking all other stocking tops till death brings you close together?

Daniel: I do.

The curate lets Alice's dress fall into place after goosing her.

Bishop, to Alice: And you, darlin', do take this copulatory organ to have and to hold in gonorrhea or in rectum to delight and obey in whip and in lash?

Alice: I do, I do, I do, I do, I do, I do. Yes, yes, yes, I do!

*Bishop, closing his eyes: Rum, bum and gramophone records
I now pronounce you dead and buried. Yeah, yeah and yeah!*

The combo starts up again and the congregation begin to twist and shake, with the exception of the in-laws who do the black bottom.

'Darling!' exclaimed Alice shaking him.

'What is it!' shouted Daniel waking up with a jerk and glaring up at her.

'Nothing, darling, you've just been having a nightmare, that's all.'

'You're not joking,' he replied, relieved to find that he was in an armchair in his own home, and not in the surrounding of his dream which had been so vivid only seconds before.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' she asked kissing him tenderly.

'All right,' said Daniel, reaching for a cigarette.

Later in the afternoon Scoop rang up, and asked Daniel in a rather sarcastic tone of voice how he was and why he had not been around town during the past few days.

'I've been rather tied up,' replied Daniel weakly.

'Yeah, I know how much,' laughed Scoop.

'What do you mean by that?'

'Don't make me laugh, you know very well what I mean.'

'For Christ sake, why don't you leave me alone?' snapped Daniel angrily.

'All right, son, don't do your nut. I didn't mean anything,' replied Scoop apologetically.

'So what have you been up to lately?' asked Daniel, trying to turn the conversation away from himself.

'Getting pissed,' laughed Scoop. 'You should have been down in the Vulture Room last night, the whole mob were there . . .'

'Were they?' asked Daniel feigning indifference.

'There wasn't a sober person in the place.'

'Is that so?'

'Honestly, Daniel, you should have been there. Lady Boyce-Liskeard was present in regal splendour, pissed as a fart. She told me that she had been having a pain in her chest for the past few months. When she went to the quack he told her that she had cancer of the left tit.'

'Good God!' exclaimed Daniel.

'Yeah, he told her that she would have to have it off, but she told him that she would rather die. He said she probably would within a year.'

'I must give her a ring,' said Daniel.

'No, don't do that, it's supposed to be a secret,' laughed Scoop.

'What a callous bastard you are,' replied Daniel.

'The way I look at it is if you got to go you got to go,' said Scoop coolly.

'But you might find it in your heart to have a little sympathy for her.'

'What's all this Victorian morality lark you're going in for these days?' asked Scoop in a shocked tone of voice. 'If you were to ask me I'd say that intended of yours is having a very bad influence on you.'

'Well, no one asked you so do me a favour and let's drop it, shall we?'

'All right, son, but don't say I didn't warn you. The next thing you'll know you'll find yourself with a brood of kids.'

'What's wrong with that?' asked Daniel.

'It's all right for some people but it isn't all right for me. And I'll tell you something, sonny boy, it isn't your style either.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes, it is,' said Scoop earnestly. 'Listen, let's have lunch tomorrow and talk things over.'

'There's nothing to talk over.'

'Well, let's have lunch anyway.'

'If you like, but don't think you can make me change my mind. I love her and I am going to marry her.'

'Have it your way, Danny boy. Meet you at the Ritz downstairs bar, one o'clock, all right?'

'All right,' replied Daniel half-heartedly.

'Must go now, I've got to write a piece about some dreary old Tory M.P. who wants to give Dublin back to the natives. He thinks such a move will get him some votes in Camden Town. See you.' With that he rang off.

Lunch the following day was a cheerless affair. Scoop as usual had arrived at the Ritz well in advance of the appointed time and was downing whisky sours at a great rate. There were only five-minute intervals between him ordering one drink and the next. Daniel arrived as Scoop sank his fifth double. Scoop looked at him, tried to smile, changed his mind, glowered, and ordered another drink. The hand of doom was upon him and the only thing that would shift it was a bottle or two of the hard stuff.

'Hello,' said Daniel sitting on a bar stool next to Scoop.

'Give him a drink, George,' said Scoop to the barman. 'He certainly needs one.'

'What's the matter with you?' asked Daniel.

'Nothing, why should anything be the matter?'

'Well, I wouldn't say that you were overjoyed with life exactly.'

'Do me a favour and stop trying to be smart. I'm not in the mood for it,' moaned Scoop, grabbing his drink and sinking it

as soon as the barman placed it in front of him, whilst Daniel picked up his glass and sipped from it gingerly.

'What's the matter? Have you gone on the wagon as well as everything else? My God, that's really adding insult to injury.'

'What on earth is eating you?' asked Daniel wondering what could have happened to put Scoop in a mood like this.

'Nothing much, I'm just browned off that's all. Can't a man be browned off now and again without everyone wanting to know why?' asked Scoop childishly.

'Far be it from me to stop anyone wallowing in their self-inflicted misery.'

'Thank you very much,' replied Scoop smiling for the first time.

'Is it me that has upset you?' asked Daniel mildly.

'Partly.'

'How?'

'You know very well how.'

'Because I am getting married?'

'What do you think?'

'Well, if it is, I'm sorry. But surely I must live my own life? I know that it isn't going to be a bed of roses, but I love the girl. Surely I must give it a try?' pleaded Daniel.

'At the expense of our friendship?'

'It doesn't have to be like that.'

'That's what you think. Let me tell you, mate, once a girl has got her hooks into you, you've had it. She won't let you go out with your friends, unless she can come along as well, and even then she's liable to keep on moaning about what a bad influence they are on you.'

The argument was weak but Daniel thought better of saying so.

'What I mean is,' Scoop continued, 'you have lost your freedom. Girls only feel safe if you both have the same friends, in other words, *her* friends!'

'Nonsense!' exclaimed Daniel.

'Is that so? Then let me tell you, my old son, that I have seen it happen time and time again. She will turn you into a slug, in no time at all you'll find that you haven't got one original thought in your head.'

'But I'll have my business interests.'

'And what might they be, may I be so bold as to ask?'

'I told you, didn't I? I'm going into business.'

'What business?'

'I haven't decided yet. I've put the matter into the hands of my bank manager.'

'Have you now?' said Scoop sarcastically.

'Yes, I am going to play the stock market or go into the import-export business or something,' said Daniel weakly.

'I see,' smiled Scoop.

'You know what the trouble with you is, don't you?' asked Daniel.

'Do tell me.'

'You've had it, that's what. You have lost confidence in everybody and everything. I don't think I have ever met anyone as disillusioned as you in my entire life. I've noticed it in your columns lately as well. All you ever seem to write about is people who are doing their best and make it appear as though they are on the make, or are corrupt.'

'Well, aren't they?' asked Scoop defiantly.

'Maybe, but I wouldn't mind betting that they are not as bad as you make out.'

'For Christ's sake let's drop it and go and eat.'

'All right,' said Daniel smiling with genuine affection. He was sorry that he had touched on one of Scoop's soft spots, and was determined not to make him unhappier than he was already. Having finished their drinks Daniel paid the bar bill and they left.

'Where do you fancy going for lunch?' asked Daniel as they crossed the hotel foyer.

'Let's go to the Caprice, it's near and I fancy feasting my

eyes on those beautiful phoney starlets,' laughed Scoop. 'The sight of them will warm my cold heart.'

'Scoop, you're incorrigible,' said Daniel with a wry smile.

'I think you're right, sunshine,' Scoop replied throwing his arm around Daniel's shoulders. They both laughed and left the hotel arm in arm under the suspicious gaze of the uniformed doorman who however saluted smartly when Daniel pressed two half-crowns into the palm of his hand.

The marriage of Daniel Valler, bachelor, to Alice Violet Walker, spinster, on 13th November that year at Caxton Hall was a gala occasion. Seldom had London seen such a galaxy of degenerates under the same roof. Scoop had reluctantly agreed to be the best man. Bubbles was the matron of honour, a function not clearly defined. Bobby Boyce-Liskeard was in attendance with her latest boy-friend, a young man of some nineteen years who announced that he shaved every other day. Then there were Alice's parents, she all decked out in a flowered dress and insane hat, he in a morning suit and a neat row of medals. There were also girls by the score almost all of whom Daniel had been to bed with at some time or another. They had turned up in droves, some with and some without invitations, to see what manner of girl it was who had captured this ineligible rake.

There was Nancie accompanied by her husband of all people. Frances with an intellectual-looking man twice her age with a beard. There was Sybil who came with Mr and Mrs Walker and had her eye on Daniel for the future. There were also a good many people whose faces Daniel had seen around town for years, but whose names he did not know. It is also interesting to note that not only was the date the thirteenth but it was also a Friday.

The ceremony was a solemn and hasty affair. The registrar, somewhat amazed by the collection of extraordinary people, gabbled his lines so fast that it was all over before

anyone had really realised that it had begun. Much to Daniel's surprise Scoop carried out his duties as best man without incident, in spite of being half-pissed. Mrs Walker dutifully began to snivel, which for some reason set Nancie off doing the same, though her tears were predictably more profuse than poor fat little Mrs Walker's whom Daniel had long since become convinced was a born loser.

Alice was radiant. She said her 'I will!' as clear as a bell, whilst Daniel had mumbled his so softly that the registrar had to ask him to repeat it, which he had done in a strangled tone of voice.

'Darling, you're too much,' sniggered Bubbles when the ceremony came to an end and she was asked by the registrar to sign the book as a witness.

As the married couple came out of the building to get into the hired Rolls Royce that would whisk them off to the reception at Claridges, a battery of T.V. and newsreel cameras began to whirl and an army of photographers jostled each other for positions from which they could get a good shot of Daniel and Alice. Though Daniel was aware that he was not completely unknown around town he had not expected as much publicity as it looked as though he was going to get. He was convinced that Scoop was at the back of it.

Taking Alice by the hand he rushed down the steps to where the car was standing, jerked open the door, shoved her inside and dived in after her before the cameramen and photographers had hardly a chance to take their picture. Scoop who had been standing next to them was also taken unawares and hurried down the steps after them, but too late. The car whizzed off down the street like a bat out of hell. At Claridges, the guests both invited and uninvited arrived in droves, some of whom had attended the ceremony and a good many who had not. Due to their rapid departure from Caxton Hall Daniel and his blushing bride were amongst the first to arrive. Scoop arrived not long after them in rather a bad temper.

'You done me out of about thirty quid running off like

that,' he said in reply to Daniel's question about the photographers and newsreel men.

'How come?' laughed Daniel.

'I tipped them off about the wedding and they were going to give me a fiver apiece for the information.'

'Well, that's charming I must say!' exclaimed Daniel. 'All I can say is it serves you right.'

'I've got to make a living, haven't I?' replied Scoop. 'Anyway you didn't say anything about not wanting the press.'

'I would have thought that you would have taken that for granted. Anyway let's drop it, shall we, and get pissed?'

'That, my friend, is the best idea you've had today,' smiled Scoop snatching a glass of whisky from a tray as a waiter passed by.

Alice gave Scoop a look full of loathing, which he did not notice, and swept across the room in the direction of her mother and father who had just come in the door. Daniel noticed the look that Alice gave Scoop and realised that she detested him, and that she was going to make trouble later on about their friendship. Scoop was right about that if nothing else.

A waiter brought a tray of drinks and offered Daniel a glass of champagne, which he accepted, drank in one gulp and took another.

'Well, son, you've had it,' said Scoop without feeling.

'You could be a little more enthusiastic,' remarked Daniel.

'Sorry, Daniel,' replied Scoop turning on a charming smile that would have won the heart of a bailiff. 'I really do wish you the best of luck, honestly I do!'

'Thank you,' smiled Daniel. 'There is little doubt that I shan't need it.'

Before Scoop could reply to this, if reply were needed, Bubbles came tearing over to where they were standing, bawling at the top of her voice:

'Darling, I have never been to such a moving wedding in my life. It really was the most endearing little scene I have

ever witnessed in my life. You looked so boyish I could have cried!' she ended throwing her arms around Daniel's neck.

'Now, now that's enough of that,' protested Daniel trying to prise her loose.

'But I'm so happy for you, cuntie, I can hardly contain myself,' she screamed.

'Try!' said Daniel, eventually managing to get out of her grip.

The spectacle of this hard-bitten old lesbian going to pieces like this was almost more than he could bear. He knew that she had a heart of gold and all that, but this was ridiculous, not to mention decidedly alarming.

Mr and Mrs Walker, without whom Alice would not have been born and with whom he had hardly exchanged two words throughout the whole of the proceedings, bore down on him followed by Alice, her veil streaming behind her.

'Whoops!' exclaimed Scoop. 'This is where I beat a hasty retreat. Be seeing you, sonny boy.' With that he grabbed Bubbles by the wrist and dragged her away in the opposite direction from whence the in-laws were coming.

'Well, young man, she's yours now. I hope you will take care of her in a manner to which she is accustomed,' said the old man.

'I'll try my best, sir,' replied Daniel beaming at Alice, who blew him a kiss.

'That's the stuff, my boy. She'll make you a good wife, she's got what it takes,' said Mr Walker. Daniel, not being sure what he meant by this, made no reply but just smiled.

'Where is it you're going on your honeymoon?' asked Mr Walker.

'Spain,' replied Alice.

'Ah, yes, Spain. Of course I don't approve of all their politics but it's a fine country, just the same,' said her father.

'Surely,' thought Daniel, 'he is not going to start all that malarky at a time like this.'

Daniel was saved from the pending verbal onslaught about

Franco and fascism by Mrs Walker who asked her husband what time their train was back to the country. This interfered with his train of thought and by some act of God he did not return to it, after telling her that they were catching the six o'clock.

Out of the corner of his eye Daniel noticed Nancie pushing her way through the crowded room in his direction: 'This is going to be just great,' he thought, but saw no escape. There was only one thing to do and that was stand his ground and brazen it out. As Nancie came up to him he looked defiantly into her eyes.

'Nancie darling,' he shouted taking her in his arms and kissing her on the cheek. 'How marvellous you could come, is this your husband? How do you do, sir? It's a pleasure to meet you, I have heard such a lot about you,' he continued, grabbing hold of her husband's hand and shaking it warmly.

'I don't think I have ever met your wife, darling,' said Nancie gritting her teeth.

'That's right, you haven't,' laughed Daniel, his heart filled with terror.

Any minute now it was going to be off, he was sure of that. As he introduced Nancie and her husband to Alice and her mother and father, there was a nasty moment when he realised that he did not know Nancie's surname or if he had, he had long since forgotten it. When he had been with her, it had been darling this and darling that and darling the other, especially the other. But they had never had much use for names; her husband saved the day by volunteering his name, which Daniel did not quite catch so it didn't matter anyway.

Daniel spied Scoop on the other side of the room, having an animated conversation with Frances. In an attempt to attract his attention he began to wave his white gloves wildly about in the air, which only resulted in him giving an astonished waiter a stinging clip around the ear as he passed with a tray of drinks.

'I'm so sorry, my dear fellow,' apologised Daniel. 'I wonder if you would be kind enough to tell that gentleman over there that I would like a word with him.' He continued pointing in Scoop's direction and almost poked a young girl's eye out whom he had never laid eyes on before in his life. Serves her right, what is she doing here anyway, he thought, as she let out a tiny shriek and scurried back into the crowd.

'Certainly, Mr Valler,' said the still somewhat stunned waiter and tottered off in the direction that Daniel had indicated.

No sooner had the waiter whispered in his ear than Scoop hot-footed it across the room to where Daniel was standing, with a fixed smile on his face, nodding his head up and down like a rocking horse as people congratulated him on his luck, which he firmly believed was rapidly running out.

'What do you want, son?' asked Scoop sidling up to him.

'Thank God you're here, can't you get me out of this?' pleaded Daniel.

'Fraid not,' smiled Scoop.

'What time do we have to be at the airport?' asked Daniel out of the corner of his mouth, as yet another stranger came up to him and squeezed his hand.

'Six thirty.'

'Well, what time is it now for fuck's sake?'

He beamed at Sybil who was wishing him luck in a rather lecherous tone of voice.

'I'm sure we will be very happy,' smiled Daniel his ear cocked awaiting Scoop's reply.

'Four o'clock,' giggled Scoop beginning to enjoy Daniel's discomfort.

'Fine mate you turned out to be,' smiled Daniel, not being able to miss seeing the funny side of it himself. 'But listen,' he went on. 'We've got to change out of our wedding frocks before we go, haven't we?'

'Sure you have, you've booked a suite upstairs for that,

haven't you?' laughed Scoop determined to be of no help whatever.

'But I had hoped to use the suite for the purpose of slipping my dearly beloved wife a bender to last her till we get to Malaga ...'

'... What you mean is consummating the marriage, old cock. Well, she'll have to wait till you get there. In any case you can't leave till you've cut the cake.'

'Well, where the fuck is it?' exclaimed Daniel, becoming exasperated.

'Where is what?' asked Alice coming up to Daniel from behind and taking his hand in hers.

'The cake?' moaned Daniel.

Scoop suddenly burst out laughing and for a few seconds had considerable difficulty in controlling himself.

'What's the matter, my angel, are you hungry?' asked Alice. 'There's simply loads of caviar around. Shall I get you some?'

'No thanks,' replied Daniel miserably.

As another well-wisher came up to congratulate him, he had a sudden urge to poke the well-meaning soul on the end of the nose but curbed the desire by looking over her head as he shook hands with her. Scoop who had now stopped laughing got two drinks from a passing waiter and handed one to Daniel.

'Come on, boy. Get this down you and cheer up. This is your wedding day and supposed to be the happiest day of your life,' he said. The remark almost made him break up again but he controlled it by swallowing the whole of his drink in one draught.

Suddenly the huge glass doors at the end of the room were swung open and two waiters wheeled in an enormous five-tier wedding cake on a trolley. The assembled guests turned and looked at it as it was wheeled into the centre of the room and many a gasp could be heard. On top of the cake stood two small dolls in bride and groom get-ups. They both looked

radiantly happy and innocent. Daniel could not help feeling rather sad for them and felt that a phallic symbol might have been more in keeping with the occasion.

'Come along you two,' gushed Mrs Walker. 'You must cut the cake and make a wish.'

Somewhat reluctantly Daniel took Alice's hand and led her to where the cake was standing, doing its best to outshine the sparkling chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

Everyone gave a rousing cheer as Daniel took an enormous knife and putting his arm around his wife cut into the snow-white icing, their hands together on the handle. Daniel wished that he was not there, whilst Alice wished that they would be happy and that he would love her for ever. Having cut the cake they stood back whilst the waiters cut it into small pieces and served it up to the guests. When offered a plate Scoop turned it down flat saying that he had not eaten a piece of cake in his life and was not starting now.

An hour later Daniel and Alice escaped from the party and went to their suite.

'Darling!' exclaimed Alice as she slumped onto the bed. 'This is the happiest day of my life.'

'Good,' remarked Daniel, absent-mindedly taking his tie off.

'Kiss me, darling.' Daniel walked over to the bed and sat down beside her, and leaning over her kissed her lightly on the lips.

'You are happy?' she asked, looking up at him expectantly.

'Sure I am, I just hate these kind of functions, that's all,' he replied, a sad expression coming over his face.

'It will soon be over, darling,' she said cupping his face in her hands. 'Do you know, my angel, you are the handsomest man I have ever seen in my life.' Suddenly there were tears in her eyes.

'What's the matter?' asked Daniel.

'Nothing, darling. I'm just so happy, that's all. You won't ever leave me, will you?' she smiled through her tears.

'No,' he replied taking her in his arms and holding her close. 'Do you know what?'

'What?' she whispered.

'I have never made love to a girl wearing a wedding dress.'

'There's a first time for everything, darling,' she giggled.

